

# Transportation Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No.:** HB-5331

AN ACT CONCERNING THE SUSPENSION OF MOTOR VEHICLE OPERATORS' LICENSES FOR FAILURE TO PAY FINES OR FEES OR

**Title:** FAILURE TO APPEAR FOR A SCHEDULED COURT APPEARANCE.

**Vote Date:** 3/18/2024

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable

**PH Date:** 3/4/2024

**File No.:**

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## **SPONSORS OF BILL:**

Joint Committee on Transportation

## **REASONS FOR BILL:**

Drivers who fail to appear in court or fail to pay fines for vehicle infractions may at present have their drivers' license revoked. Due to there being cases where individuals, who were unaware of an outstanding fine or court date due to vehicle infractions, this bill seeks to eliminate this penalty as instances have occurred wherein drivers have licenses revoked even when unaware they have outstanding fines or court dates.

## **RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:**

### **Garrett Eucalitto, Commissioner, CT Department of Transportation**

The commissioner expresses concerns over the removal of the power of the state to suspend an operator's license at a time when unsafe driving is at an all-time high. He goes on to express feelings that doing so, would allow drivers to pay even greater disregard for the safety of others on the roadway by removing a deterrent for failing to pay tickets. The commissioner states that HB 5331 runs contrary to other efforts made by the Department of Transportation to introduce stricter enforcement of penalties for unsafe driving such as the Automated Work Zone Speed Camera pilot program.

## **NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

### **Naimah Browne, Student, Achievement First Hartford High School**

Provided testimony in support of the bill, stating penalizing failure to pay fines resulting in the suspension of one's license negatively impact low-income communities.

**Violette Haldane, Executive Director, Advocacy to Legacy**

Provided testimony in support of the bill. She raises three issues with the current law as it stands. Firstly, license suspension for failure to pay fines disproportionately affects low-income individuals. This may create a cycle of poverty, as loss of license due to failure to afford a fine payment makes travel for employment difficult. Second, barriers to compliance are to blame for individuals missing court dates, which include lack of transportation, work, or family emergencies. License suspensions exacerbate these challenges. Thirdly, suspending a driver's license for failure to pay a fine essentially criminalizes poverty by punishing individuals who are struggling financially. Haldane offers solutions to these social ills. These include ending automatic suspensions for failure to pay fines or appear in court, alternative enforcement mechanisms such as community service, and judicial discretion which considers legitimate reasons for failing to pay the fine or missing a court date. Haldane supports HB5331 as it promotes equality and fairness, reduces unnecessary hardship, and encourages compliance through supportive measures.

**Johnathan Hewett, Student, Enfield High School**

Provided testimony in support of this bill. Hewett witnessed the difficulties his neighbor encountered after having his license suspended due to lacking the money to pay a ticket.

**Benedict Daigle, Assistant Public Defender, Office of Chief Public Defender, CT Division of Public Defender Services**

Provided testimony in support of the bill. Suspension of license because of failure to pay a fine or appear in court is unfairly penalizes low-income individuals and fails to consider legitimate reasons an individual may violate such infractions. HB5331 will benefit individuals and communities in the state by removing unfair punishments.

**Jess Zaccagnino, Policy Counsel, American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut**

Provided testimony in support of the bill. The ACLU asserts the fines and fees in the criminal justice system trap people in cycles of debt which disproportionately harms minorities and people in poverty. HB5331 works towards dismantling fines and fees in the legal system which ultimately criminalize poverty, and the ACLU recommends further action to eliminate more fines from Connecticut's legal code.

**Jay Stange, Transport Hartford Coordinator, Center for Latino Progress**

Provided testimony in support of the bill.

**NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

**Nicholas Amato**

Provided testimony in opposition to the bill.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY**

**Patrick Griffin, Chief State Attorney, CT Division of Criminal Justice**

Provided commentary on the bill. While the Division of Criminal Justice takes no position on HB5331, they warn HB5331 will leave the state without a mechanism to resolve motor vehicle cases short of seeking arrest, which itself is a harsh penalty for most cases. Eliminating

suspensions result in no consequences for traffic violators and leaves unresolvable cases on court dockets.

**Lee Ross, Deputy Director, CT Judicial Branch External Affairs Division**

Provided commentary on the bill. While the Judicial Branch takes no position on HB5331, they warn HB5331 will leave the state without a mechanism to resolve motor vehicle cases short of seeking arrest, which itself is a harsh penalty for most cases. Eliminating suspensions result in no consequences for traffic violators and leaves unresolvable cases on court dockets.

**Reported by: Garrett Smith**

**Date: 4/3/24**