

LOCAL

'Arresting folks for being poor:' How Providence will help drivers get their licenses back



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Providence's top reason for arrests is not drunk driving, drug use, disorderly conduct, or violent offenses.

It's driving without a license.

That's what Mayor Jorge Elorza revealed on Wednesday after an operations review of the police department.

"We'd never done something like this, so it was surprising to us, but that caused us to go even deeper into the data," Elorza said.

Bret Jacob, who serves as the city's director of research development and an LGBTQIA+ liaison, discovered that the primary reason those arrested did not have licenses was unpaid court fines and fees.

"The city of Providence literally has been arresting folks for being poor," Elorza said.

As a result of the city's findings, the mayor announced the start of a \$724,000 driver's license restoration program to help those who are buried in fines and fees.

The program will be funded through \$700,000 of American Rescue Plan Act dollars and the remainder will be grant funding.

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The city's program will be coordinated by OpenDoors, an organization that offers support to those with criminal records. As part of its work, the group is partnering with Amos House, the Pro Bono Collaborative at Roger Williams University School of Law, the Rhode Island Center for Justice and the Center for Health and Justice Transformation.

Applicants for the new program may be able to receive \$500 to dig themselves out debt, and get on track toward license restoration.

'Months to catch up'

Councilwoman Rachel Miller reflected on her own experience losing her license after receiving a speeding ticket driving in Upstate New York more than 15 years ago.

Miller said she stashed the ticket in her glovebox and forgot about it. When she attempted to renew her license more than a year later, she discovered it had been revoked.

The roughly \$55 cost of her ticket had ballooned to hundreds of dollars.

"It took me months to catch up," Miller said, adding, "I see people who have one infraction that they cannot pay that spirals and spirals."

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Andy Horowitz, a Roger Williams law school dean who directs its criminal defense clinic, knows all too well exactly how the spiral begins.

"You have bills you already can't pay," he said. "You get stopped for driving with a suspended license, they tow your car, they give you more license suspension, and it just builds and builds and builds."

Among the more than 100 clients Horowitz has represented is OpenDoors community organizer Brandon Robinson, who went without a license for more than 16 years.

Since then, Robinson has been able to find a job and start studying for a master's degree in public administration at RWU.

"And I'm able to do this without fear of going to jail for driving on a suspended license," Robinson said.

Who's eligible and how to apply

Providence residents with incomes at or below 65% of area median income may apply. Housing is not a prerequisite to be considered.

"Applicants must also be eligible for identification documents, such as an ID, Social Security card or birth certificate, and provide proof of Providence residency," the city said.

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The city said "factors like financial need and ability to pay related expenses like car insurance" will also be considered. Those with license suspensions for moving violations that resulted in felony convictions cannot qualify.

For more information and to apply online, visit www.PVDRescuePlan.Com/Apply or find a paper application at either OpenDoors or Amos House.