



Advocates for Basic
Legal Equality, Inc.

DAYTON OFFICE

130 W. Second St.
Suite 700 East
Dayton, OH 45402

In Dayton:
(937) 228-8104

Toll-free:
(800) 837-0814

Fax: (937) 535-4600
TTY: (888) 545-9497

www.ablelaw.org

Testimony in Support of HB 285
Senate Local Government, Public Safety, and Veterans Affairs Committee
January 21, 2020

Joshua M. Loya
Staff Attorney
Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Inc.

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Maharath, and members of the Senate Local Government, Public Safety, and Veterans Affairs Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 285 to establish a permanent driver's license reinstatement fee debt reduction program. My name is Joshua Loya, and I am an attorney at Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Inc. (ABLE). ABLE is a non-profit regional law firm that provides high quality legal assistance in civil matters to help low-income individuals and groups in 32 counties in western Ohio achieve self-reliance, and equal justice and economic opportunity.

I practice in the Neighborhoods B.U.I.L.D. Dayton project, a community lawyering project that collaborates with leaders in exceptionally challenged neighborhoods in Dayton to address community-identified issues that trap neighborhoods in the cycle of poverty. The neighborhoods we serve identified driver's license suspensions as a significant barrier to economic development for individuals and families in Dayton. My project team members and I spearheaded ABLE and our partner firm, Legal Aid of Western Ohio, Inc. (LAWO)'s response to the Reinstatement Fee Amnesty Initiative to help people get back on the road and back to work.

The legal clinics ABLE organized under the Driver's License Reinstatement Fee Amnesty Initiative, created by House Bill 336 from the 132nd General Assembly, assisted hundreds of individuals. Specifically, during the eight months of the initial Amnesty Initiative, ABLE and LAWO held fifteen legal clinics in Dayton, Toledo, and Lima. In these clinics, we educated people about the program and assisted eligible individuals with fee waiver and reduction applications. Our clinics in western Ohio helped nearly 2,000 people reduce or waive approximately \$787,246 in reinstatement fees. In Dayton, alone, ABLE helped approximately 1,198 individuals reduce or waive \$440,943 in fees through seven legal clinics.

The pilot Reinstatement Fee Amnesty Initiative changed many lives, including Jane and Nick. Jane was a pregnant mother of two, who had not had a license in years. Jane owed \$2,600 in reinstatement fees and was able to reduce her costs to \$175 by attending one of ABLE's legal clinics. Because of the Fee Amnesty Initiative, Jane could afford to pay her reinstatement fees and got her license back, allowing her to take her children to daycare and attend her doctors' appointments. Nick owed \$7,195 in reinstatement fees. The Fee Amnesty Initiative reduced his fees owed to \$350. This reduction allowed Nick to gain a valid license for the first time in seventeen years. Nick's license had been suspended, in part, because of unpaid child support. At the



clinic, he was able to meet with the Child Support Enforcement Agency and resolve his outstanding child support debt. Having a license gave Nick the ability to travel to see his children and be part of their lives again. Court, BMV, and other agency staff reported to ABLE and LAWO that they benefited from the BMV Fee Amnesty program as well, because it allows them to collect fees, child support, and court costs that otherwise would go unpaid. House Bill 285 will provide an incentive and opportunity for even more Ohioans to correct unpaid court costs, make child support payments, and resolve other fines and fees, which benefits local agencies and the individuals.

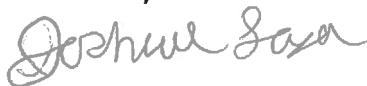
By making the Reinstatement Fee Amnesty Initiative a permanent debt reduction program, many individuals who were unable to attend the first legal clinics or go to individual BMV offices will be able to get on the path to getting their licenses back. Many Ohioans who live in rural parts of the state were unable to travel to clinics or access the internet to take advantage of the temporary program. In rural areas with no public transportation, it can be nearly impossible to maintain employment without a driver's license. By making the program permanent, House Bill 285 will allow organizations like ABLE more time to coordinate clinics in rural areas, which will help more Ohioans reinstate their driver's licenses.

Expanding the scope of individuals eligible for this program to include those who receive Medicaid, Ohio Works First, Supplemental Security Income, and Veteran's Affairs benefits, in addition to SNAP benefits, will allow many more low-income individuals to qualify for a fee waiver. Many Ohioans attended our clinics in desperate need of a complete fee waiver due to extreme financial hardship but did not qualify for a waiver because they did not receive SNAP.

House Bill 285 will be transformative for many Ohioans in ABLE's client communities. The inability to drive is a major barrier to employment in Ohio. The burden imposed by hefty reinstatement fees—some as high as \$20,000-- can be an insurmountable barrier that many low-income Ohioans simply cannot afford to overcome. During the short period that the Fee Amnesty Initiative was in effect, the Ohioans we served repeatedly shared stories of how the program gave them hope and how their lives were going to change for the better. On behalf of the large number of ABLE clients who have benefited from the initial Fee Amnesty Initiative, and the even larger number who will benefit from a permanent and expanded Fee Amnesty Program, ABLE strongly supports the passage of House Bill 285.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely



Joshua Loya
Advocates for Basic Legal Equality Inc.
Staff Attorney
Phone: 937-535-4420
Fax: 937-535-4600
Email: jloya47@gmail.com