

DRIVERS LICENSE RECOVERY PROGRAM HELPS FAMILIES IMPROVE JOB PROSPECTS

“Mary” is a single 22-year-old African American mother of one child. In late 2008, she was unemployed and looking for a job through PSI, a Wisconsin workfare program. Her driver’s license had been suspended, and without it, her employment prospects were dim. PSI referred her to an innovative new program in Milwaukee, the Center for Driver’s License Recovery and Employability. With the guidance of a Center caseworker, Mary was able to get her license reinstated in March, 2009, and since then has completed Certified Nursing Assistant training at the Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), enrolled in MATC’s Registered Nurse degree program, and is now working. She believes getting her license back was a critical step in building a better future for herself and her family.

Losing a driver’s license is not just an inconvenience. It can impact an individual’s ability to find or keep a job, attend community college or technical training, or transport children to daycare, school or medical appointments. Not having a valid license can disqualify a person from applying for certain jobs, particularly in the health care and construction fields, where often it is a pre-condition for employment. The lack of a license can keep a family stuck in a situation of dependence, disconnection and hopelessness. Oftentimes, the loss of a license is caused more by poverty and the inability to pay fines and fees than it is by a willful disregard of the law. And, as license suspension has increasingly become a common sanction for non-driving and non-safety offenses, more and more families are caught up in this web.

Helping individuals to regain their driver’s license is a part of the Casey Foundation’s FES strategy to help families overcome barriers, access job opportunities, and build economic stability and success.

Program is Supported by Judicial System as Well as Workforce Organizations

Judge James Gramling spent 21 years as a Municipal Court Judge for the city of Milwaukee. During those years, he saw a constant parade of cases involving driver’s license suspension and revocation. In the early 1990s, it became very clear to him that once low-income people were caught up in the process of suspensions and revocation, it became a cycle that they could not escape. This created substantial problems from both a justice perspective and a personal perspective: It tied up the Court’s time, it created a mountain of paperwork, and it kept poor people from being able to take the steps necessary to get their lives on a better track.

Having worked in legal service programs for low-income people for 15 years after law school, Gramling had an insider’s perspective on the barriers poverty can create. He decided to start an “advice project” with several community organizations that had clients who needed valid driver’s licenses in order to get or keep jobs. Gramling began to spend several days a month meeting with defendants, one on one, helping them to come up with a plan to deal with their license problems. There were two other judges in Milwaukee Municipal Court, and Gramling enlisted the other two to join him in his project. As the

years went by, Gramling talked to others who were concerned about the strain and expense on the judicial system or who viewed the situation from a workforce perspective—people could not get jobs if they had suspended or revoked driver’s licenses.

A core group of community leaders, including Judge Gramling, came together in 2005 to create an institutional response to this problem. A representative from *Making Connections* in Milwaukee, part of the Casey Foundation’s *Making Connections* initiative*, participated in this planning effort. They spent two years planning and fund-raising to develop a model for what eventually became the Center for Driver’s License Recovery and Employability (CDLRE). During this time, a successful weekend event was held in the *Making Connections* neighborhood that offered drivers license recovery as a featured service, and Casey contributed funding to create a database for the new Center. The Milwaukee Bar Association and an anonymous donor provided \$11,000 in funds to kick off the design and organization of the program. That was followed by \$200,000 in funding from the City of Milwaukee and then \$200,000 from foundations, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In March of 2007, the CDLRE began to serve clients.

The program is perfectly situated to meet the needs of both clients and caseworkers. Operating out of donated space at the Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), the Center is right across the street from the courts and within quick walking distance of the Department of Motor Vehicles. Clients, caseworkers and Center attorneys can easily track down the information they need and attend court hearings without incurring the extra time and expense for travel around the city.

Referrals Come From Community Organizations and Grateful Clients

The Center’s staff consists of a director, six full-time case managers, four attorneys—including Judge Gramling—a service coordinator, intake coordinator, paralegal, and an administrative assistant. Clients come to the Center through referrals from Milwaukee nonprofits (most often workforce development organizations) or government agencies, or they come on their own because they have heard about the free service from friends or family members.

The Center serves approximately 2,400 clients each year. A typical case requires approximately one to three months to resolve if legal assistance is not needed; or an average of six months to resolve if legal assistance is necessary. Caseworkers work with each client to determine the background of the individual’s suspension or revocation and what steps are required to get the license reinstated. They also look at what alternatives might be available to paying accumulated fines or fees—this might include payment plans to spread the cost over a period of time, community service to replace part or all of

* For the past decade, *Making Connections* communities have been working to improve the lives and prospects of families living in some of America’s toughest neighborhood by creating economic opportunities, improving the quality of services and supports, and strengthening social networks.

the amount owed, or ascertaining the requirements of courts outside of Milwaukee for those clients who have tickets in several jurisdictions.

The most common reason a driver's license is suspended or revoked is failure to pay fines. Although each case is different, a typical case might be: A driver has a tail light out and has ten days to fix it or receives a \$50 ticket to be paid within 60 days. The individual cannot pay the ticket, so he misses the deadline and his license is suspended. He works at a job located a distance from home, so he keeps driving to work, hoping not to be stopped. He then receives an "operating while suspended" ticket, for \$109. He then drives again and gets caught again, receiving another "operating while suspended" ticket and fine. He doesn't know that it is possible to work out a way to deal with the fines, and he is afraid of losing his job, so he keeps driving. With his fourth ticket, his license is revoked for six months, and he is required to buy Safety Responsibility Insurance for three years after the revocation expires. The insurance is very expensive, costing \$1,200 to \$2,000 per year.

Community Service Assignments Provide an Alternative to Expensive Fines

Although the Center's name includes the word "Employability," the program does not provide employment training, placement or retention services. As Nichole Yunk, Center director points out, "A valid driver's license makes one more employable. In helping clients recover their licenses, we not only resolve a significant barrier to employment, but provide hope to eliminate some of the barriers our clients face in navigating life."

Caseworkers get to know their clients, and they help connect them to other services they may need, such as health insurance, dental programs, affordable car loans, employment agencies, educational or technical training, clothing for job interviews, and more. Each client signs a "client participation agreement" stating that they will maintain contact with their caseworker throughout the time they are working with the Center. Each caseworker handles about 75 cases at a time, and they check with each client at a minimum of once every two weeks to make sure they are on track to getting their license problems resolved. In 2008, 563 of the Center's clients received a valid driver license status. To date, that number is 1,067.

The Center attorneys help clients navigate the legal system, represent them in municipal and circuit courts, and work out alternatives to paying the full amount of fines through community service, tax intercept and payment plans. As the program matures, and the workload increases, the Center is beginning to get additional pro bono help from city law firms.

Community service requirements are usually fulfilled at one of a number of Milwaukee nonprofit organizations. Clients can choose an organization that is located close to where they live. Community service could include filling boxes and dispersing food at a local food bank; serving breakfast and lunch at a homeless shelter; performing office and clerical work, such as typing and filing; doing maintenance and cleaning; helping at a city youth program.

Valid Drivers Licenses Can Lead to New Jobs or Better Opportunities

Andrea Dean, a Center caseworker and team leader, sees an uptick in her clients' confidence as they move through the program and begin to resolve their problems. "Many clients have no optimism whatsoever when they come to the Center, as they may have been trying to obtain employment for a year or longer. But by working with us, they have been able to get a valid license and then they get a job. Or, they have been able to improve their employment because they get a valid license. One of my clients went from a minimum wage job to \$12.00 an hour, because he can now drive a forklift. And, we received a letter from one client who said the program had made a huge impact. He had gotten a job and his family's quality of life had improved—all because he now has a valid driver's license."

Sometimes families get involved too, as they try to support the efforts of a family member who is trying to regain their license. Andrea tells of a father who drove his 19-year-old son back and forth to each appointment. The father was a truck driver and he wanted his son to resolve his problems. The son also wanted to be a truck driver but needed to clean up his record and get a valid license. Another mother of a young client telephones her son's caseworker on a regular basis to follow up—making sure that her son is attending appointments and doing what he needs to do to succeed.

The caseworkers and attorneys at CDLRE can feel at times like they are inundated with work. There is no shortage of people with driver's license suspensions and revocations who are desperate for help. But, it is also rewarding work, giving staff the ability to see real results in a fairly short period of time. "I love what I do," says Andrea. "In order to do this job, you have to like to work with people and be able to connect with them. Some people say, 'It's just a license.' But when you are working with someone who has not been employed for a long time and you see what getting a license means to them, it is very gratifying. Clients are grateful for our services, and I enjoy seeing that I've made a difference in someone's life."