

March 20, 2020

Office of Governor Tim Walz and Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan
130 State Capitol
75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard
St. Paul, MN 55155

Re: Impact of COVID-19 crisis on people who owe court debt for traffic or criminal violations

Dear Governor Walz and Lieutenant Governor Flanagan,

Thank you for your leadership in this time of uncertainty. We have seen your administration take important steps in the last few days to slow the spread of COVID-19 and protect Minnesotans from the direct and indirect effects of this pandemic.

The undersigned coalitions represent over a hundred nonprofit organizations that are concerned about the potentially devastating financial effects of COVID-19 on individuals who owe court debt for traffic or criminal violations. These individuals and their families are some of the most financially vulnerable people in our communities. Many of them work in low-paying jobs that can't be done remotely, so they will be some of the first to bear the harsh financial impact of this crisis. We know families are struggling to pay for food, rent, and medical care, so it's critical that their resources not be diverted to pay court debt during the crisis.

Additionally, our member organizations are concerned about people involved in the criminal justice system who are deprived of their personal vehicle or driving rights. The use of personal vehicles allows for social distancing while traveling that, under these extraordinary circumstances, cannot be achieved when using public transportation.

To address these pressing issues, we offer the following recommendations.

Delay collection of court debt.

We must ensure that court debt is not a barrier to people meeting their family's basic needs during this crisis. We applaud the decision by the Judicial Branch to halt late penalties, collections referrals, and driver's license suspensions for nonpayment of criminal justice debt. Additionally, we recommend your administration:

- Instruct the Minnesota Department of Revenue to suspend all collection activities related to court debt, including wage garnishment, liens on property, and offsets to tax-refunds, unemployment insurance and other benefits.
- Notify all individuals with court debt that there will be no adverse consequences for failing to pay fines or keep up with payment plans during the crisis.

Prioritize access to personal vehicles

In order to ensure people can utilize their person vehicle for essential travel and to minimize reliance on public transportation, we recommend your administration:

- Reinstatement of driver's licenses that were suspended for nonpayment of traffic tickets or failure to appear in court on cases unrelated to dangerous driving.
- Instruct law enforcement to release individuals with a warning for driving on a suspended driver's license where there is no dangerous driving violation involved.
- Encourage local governments to stop towing and impounding vehicles for unpaid fines and fees and for municipal code violations that do not affect public safety.
- Encourage local governments to stop issuing parking tickets except where a vehicle is causing an immediate public safety risk such as blocking a fire lane.
- Release vehicles previously impounded for violations unrelated to dangerous driving and waive storage and other fees.

Thank you again for your leadership in this crisis. We hope you and members of your leadership team will consider the particular financial vulnerability of people involved in the criminal justice systems and take thoughtful action to protect those populations.

Sincerely,

ACLU-MN

Black Women's Wealth Alliance

Cornerstone Advocacy Service

Growth & Justice

Hennepin County Adult Representation Services

Joint Religious Legislative Coalition

Justice Action Network

KOOTASCA Community Action

Legal Services Advocacy Project

Minneapolis City Attorney's Office

Minnesota Asset Building Coalition

Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless

Minnesota Community Action Partnership

Minnesota Justice Research Center

Minnesota Second Chance Coalition

Office of the Ramsey County Attorney

The Lift Garage

The Saint Paul City Attorney's Office

Voices for Racial Justice

cc: The Honorable Paul Gazelka; The Honorable Susan Kent; The Honorable Melissa Hortman; The Honorable Kurt Daudt; Emily Lefholz

