

Officials mull license-suspension reforms

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NEW BRUNSWICK -- Fifty percent of people who lost their driver's license had them suspended for offenses that have nothing to do with driving, and state motor vehicle officials want to determine if the system needs to be changed.

State Motor Vehicle Services officials announced Wednesday a survey of 7,500 drivers who have had their license suspended. The survey is being done by the Voorhees Transportation Institute at Rutgers University, as part of work being done by the agency's Fairness and Affordability Task Force.

"License suspension is one thing we agree on, that there is an usually high percentage of reasons we suspend licenses for, which are unrelated to operating a vehicle," said Gordan Deal, Motor Vehicle Services spokesman.

In 2003, 713,498 licenses were suspended. The bulk of those were done by Motor Vehicle Services, and others were court-ordered.

Licenses can be suspended for any of 300 reasons, varying from failure to pay child support, being found guilty of painting graffiti or failure to answer a court summons for a dog or cat license complaint, Deal said. In some cases, a municipal court can suspend a license for an overdue parking ticket.

Losing a driver's license for a nondriving reason has been an issue the National Motorists Association has been trying to correct, said state chapter coordinator Steve Carrellas, who welcomes the survey.

"Why should my privilege to drive be suspended for something not related to driving? We support solving that problem and we'll be most assertive. If it's not related to driving, you shouldn't be suspended for it, period," Carrellas said. "Let's get back to fairness."

Carrellas said suspending licenses for driving offenses is appropriate and suggested that the state consider suspending the registration of a vehicle with an overdue parking ticket because the summons is written on a vehicle, not a driver.

"Driving-related issues are fair game; drivers have a responsibility," he said. "But the state has a responsibility and fairness is paramount."

The survey also looks at the ramifications of driver's license suspension and asks motorists if they suffered economic loss -- such as losing their job, losing wages or difficulty finding work because of a suspension. It also asks for their ideas on reforming the suspension system.

The survey asks whether the state should issue provisional licenses to suspended drivers to permit limited driving to work or medical appointments. Provisional or "hardship" licenses are issued in some other states.

The drivers surveyed were selected at random, said Rick Remington, Voorhees Transportation Institute spokesman. Results will be included in the overall task force report, he said.