



Jersey surveys suspended drivers

Study reviews if state should change policies

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Perhaps they failed to make their child-support payments. Or they had trouble with building code violations. Maybe they didn't show up to municipal court hearings for not registering their pets.

Those are some of the reasons why more than 700,000 New Jersey drivers had their motor vehicle licenses suspended last year.

"There are about 300 violations that the state suspends licenses for, and very few of them are tied to an actual moving violation," said Don Borkowski, the Motor Vehicle Commission's director of driver management and regulatory affairs.

Over the past week, the commission sent questionnaires to 7,500 drivers whose licenses have been suspended -- part of an ongoing study on whether the state needs to change its policies on driving privileges.

The Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University, which is working on the study with the commission, has surveyed other states' policies and has been analyzing the demographic profiles of people whose licenses are suspended to determine whether drivers with low incomes end up getting penalized disproportionately.

The study comes after a report by the Fix DMV Commission in 2002 highlighted irregularities with the license suspension program. That study said there was a growing number of cases in which people who lost their licenses then ended up losing their jobs because they could not get to work, and eventually became burdened with so much debt that they couldn't pay the original fines to get their licenses restored.

The report said that in 2002 there were 23,000 people who owed surcharges of more than \$10,000.

"The likelihood is small that these individuals will ever pay any of the debt they owe or recover their driving license," the report said.

The survey being mailed to the 7,500 motorists asks such questions as whether losing their licenses cost them their jobs and whether it caused stress in their lives.

"The state needs an accurate account of how motorists are being affected by suspensions in order to alleviate any inequities and avoid creating new ones," said Jon Carnegie, assistant director of the Voorhees Transportation Center.

Voorhees' researchers have determined that New Jersey is one of six states that does not have a program that allows suspended motorists to drive to work or to medical appointments.

Assemblyman Joseph Cryan (D-Union) has tried to get the Legislature to adopt a bill that would allow New Jerseyans to drive under certain circumstances, even with a suspended license. So far, his bill has received approval only from the Assembly's Law and Public Safety Committee.

In many cases, Cryan said, suspended drivers feel they have no choice but to get behind the wheel to get to their jobs. If they get caught, they end up facing more fines, which makes it even more difficult for them to become legal drivers, he said.

"People ought to be able to get back and forth to work," Cryan said. "In a state as expensive as ours, it's creating an economic hardship that's unreasonable."

As part of the 2003 state law called the Motor Vehicle Security and Customer Service Act, the Motor Vehicle Commission has created a task force to look at the fairness of license suspensions. That panel will begin meeting in the winter, and officials said it may make recommendations for changes in the state's system.