

Statement from Executive Director Angela Cioffi:

“The Legal Aid Justice Center launched the Drive Down the Debt Campaign in 2014 when our local reentry council identified lack of a driver’s license as the number one problem facing people with court involvement. In fact, our local jail did its own study and found that driving on a suspended license was one of the top 5 reasons people found themselves locked up.

The first thing to say about our driver’s license campaign is that it’s not really about driving. It’s about basic human dignity and the right to live your life and take care of your family.

For example, Kimberly Hopkins—an army veteran in Amherst County—lost her license when she could not afford to pay fines and costs related to speeding and bald tires. When she lost her license, she lost her low-wage job. When she lost her job, she lost her food stamps because she was considered able-bodied and was not working. She was literally selling her blood plasma to make ends meet.

So for Kimberly Hopkins, Damian Stinnie, and the hundreds of thousands of Virginians caught in this brutal cycle of debt, unemployment, and incarceration, I want to thank the political leaders for pushing this issue to the top of the priority list. Thank you, Governor Northam, for this announcement today and your administration’s prior work to move this forward; thank you to Senator Bill Stanley, who introduced bills for several sessions to repeal this harmful practice, and is as tenacious a champion as any issue has ever seen; thank you to all the supportive legislators—several of whom we’re fortunate to have here today—including the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus, and many more folks on both sides of the aisle, who all recognize that this issue transcends partisanship and reaches deep into the daily lives of nearly one million Virginians in every corner of the Commonwealth.

People like to say that driving is a privilege, not a right. But 87 % of Virginians rely on a car to get to jobs, medical appointments, places of worship, and the grocery store. So I say driving is no more a privilege than it is to work, eat, pray, and take care of your family.

It certainly doesn’t feel like a privilege to Brianna Morgan who is here with us today and will speak next. Ms. Morgan is a mother of three children who lost her license in 2015 when she defaulted on a payment plan to the courts because she had no income. Without a license, Ms. Morgan could not do basic things for her family like go grocery shopping and take her children to medical appointments. Ms. Morgan was recently able to get her license back, and has been able to keep it now because of the federal court injunction preventing the state from automatically suspending it again. This is Virginia’s form of debtor’s prison, and it’s time to bring it to an end.”