

KCK drivers are losing licenses because they can't afford fees.

kimberly and her kids

Kimberly Williams and her kids

New program aims to help

BY NATALIE WALLINGTON FEBRUARY 28, 2023 6:08 PM copyright [Kansas City Star](#)

Last March, when it came time for Kimberly Williams to make her car insurance payment of around \$150, the money just wasn't there.

Since the single mother of two who works in a public school cafeteria couldn't afford to pay for car insurance, she couldn't update the registration on her car in Kansas City, Kansas. Williams was soon pulled over and ticketed for expired tags.

After a series of tickets, her driver's license was suspended — not due to reckless driving or an unsafe vehicle, but simply due to her inability to pay the mounting fines and ticket fees.

“When you miss one, it starts adding up,” Williams told The Star.

Then, a few months later, she found herself somewhere she never thought she would be: locked up in a Wyandotte County jail for driving with a suspended license.

“I was supposed to do a year in jail because of my traffic violations,” Williams said. “There was no drug charges, no gun charges, I’ve never had a felony, but just because of the traffic alone.”

“The whole time I was in jail, I prayed,” she recalled.

After four days behind bars, authorities brought her to court where she received what she called a “godsend.” An attorney named Micah Tempel with the nonprofit [Kansas Legal Services](#) successfully argued for her charges to be dismissed.

He also introduced her to a small pilot program called [Project Green Light](#). Ultimately, the group helped cover \$1,390 in fines and fees to get Williams out of debt and get her driver's license reinstated this fall.

She now pays a \$100 insurance cost every month — an amount she says she is able to handle now that her massive debt to Wyandotte County has been paid off — but she knows she's not the only one going through something similar.

“There’s people like me everywhere that need that help,” she said.

Across the country, at least 11 million people have had their licenses suspended and can’t drive because they couldn’t afford to pay fines and fees, according to [a report from the ACLU](#).

What Is Project Green Light?

Project Green Light is a new program through the [Kansas City Community Bail Fund](#) focused on reducing illegal driving in the metro by helping people pay needed fees and navigating the complex system of license reinstatement.

Organizers say it’s the first program of its kind in the country offering a comprehensive approach to curbing illegal driving.

The goal of the project is to keep people out of debt and out of jail because of vehicle-related payments like car insurance, personal property taxes, license renewal fees, inspection fees, registration and tickets that result from not having these documents up-to-date.

According to Kansas City municipal court data obtained by Project Green Light organizers, over 2,200 ‘driving while suspended’ charges and 4,500 ‘driving without insurance’ charges were filed within city limits in 2022.

A total of [22 states nationwide](#) have eliminated or severely restricted the practice of suspending people’s licenses because of debt they owe — but Kansas and Missouri are not among them.

“It’s like they’re being penalized for being poor,” said Chloe Cooper, the director of the Kansas City Community Bail Fund and creator of Project Green Light.

“It’s a big chunk of money that you have to pay to get your car registered with insurance... that lump sum, that’s going to be hard for people.”

Cooper is no stranger to these difficulties. Seven years ago, after leaving an abusive relationship, she found herself in what one legal expert called the “abyss” of license suspension. “I remember thinking, why is there no help for this?” Cooper said.

“If I don’t have my car, I can’t get to school. If I can’t get to school, I can’t have this better life. This is a necessity for me.”

In addition to covering costs, the project also aims to tackle the more complicated issue of driver’s license reinstatement for Jackson and Wyandotte County residents who have had their licenses suspended simply due to nonpayment of fines and fees. The program is recruiting volunteer lawyers to help.

Impacts Every Aspect of Life

Bail fund organizers and legal experts say that driving illegally isn’t a motivation problem — it’s a financial one.

Cooper says she was told by a court clerk in Johnson County that Williams’ experience in jail was not unusual, but actually a common occurrence in Kansas for drivers who are unable to pay their fees.

“She said, when someone continues not to pay, the judge may issue shock time in jail because he feels like the individual is not taking this matter seriously,” Cooper recalled. “Like, it couldn’t be that they just don’t have the money.”

“Shock time” is just one example of the challenges associated with “driving while poor,” organizers told The Star.

Other examples include higher insurance premiums for residents of low-income neighborhoods, fines for nonpayment of other fines, legal fees for license reinstatement and insurance company requirements of up to six months of payments up front for drivers who have struggled with license suspension.

“Suspending a person’s driver’s license for not paying court debt or failing to appear, ultimately traps people in a cycle of court debt that impacts every aspect of their life,” said Alex English, a managing attorney for Kansas Legal Services, at an event earlier this month.

How to Apply for Assistance

Project Green Light officially launches on Wednesday.

You can apply for help through the [project’s webpage here](#).

Currently, only residents of Jackson or Wyandotte counties can apply for assistance. Organizers hope to expand their services in the future.

Applicants must either be enrolled in a government assistance program like SNAP, Section 8 or Medicaid, or qualify based on the program’s [maximum income guidelines](#).

If you don’t meet these criteria, a social service agency or parole officer can still apply to the program on your behalf without having to show proof of income or government assistance.

Eligible applicants will then be contacted within 7-14 days for an intake interview. During this conversation, you may be asked to send proof of your illegal driving issue, such as expired tags, a vehicle-related bill you aren’t able to pay, a suspended license or other documentation.

Cooper said that while the project will endeavor to help as many clients as possible, it likely won’t be able to help everyone who applies.

“Our number one priority would be helping those applicants that are at risk of going to jail within the next 30 days due to a court order,” said Cooper.

“We don’t want anyone going to jail.” She added that after assisting those at risk of jail time, the program will try to take on a mix of clients who just need payments made at the DMV and more complicated cases like those who need their driver’s licenses reinstated.

Those interested in contributing to the project can [donate online here](#), [apply to be a volunteer here](#) or contact the organization at ProjectGreenLight@kcbail.fund.

Read more at: <https://www.kansascity.com/article272597836.html#storylink=cpy>

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Table of Contents

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