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Civil Rights Advocates Sue to End Unlawful Driver's License Suspensions in Tennessee

NASHVILLE – Last week, attorneys from the **National Center for Law and Economic Justice (NCLEJ)**, **Civil Rights Corps**, **Just City**, and the law firm **Baker Donelson Bearman Caldwell & Berkowitz**, [filed a federal class action lawsuit](#), *Robinson, et al. v. Purkey, et al.*, challenging Tennessee's suspension of more than a *quarter of a million* driver's licenses of people who were too poor to pay traffic tickets. These suspensions occur without basic constitutional protections and have prevented countless indigent Tennesseans from accessing jobs, health care, child care, and other fundamental aspects of daily life. The suspensions also raise profound racial justice concerns – African-American drivers are *four times more likely* to lose their licenses for nonpayment of traffic tickets than white drivers.

Now, Plaintiffs Fred Robinson and Ashley Sprague have asked the court to order the Defendants to reinstate their driver's licenses immediately – and to halt the policies and practices that deprive thousands of poor Tennesseans of their driver's licenses solely because of their poverty.

Fred Robinson is a 32-year-old resident of Rutherford County, Tennessee. He suffers from serious disabilities and has been recommended for a liver transplant. In 2016, Mr. Robinson received traffic citations that carried fines and costs well beyond his means. When he could not pay, the Defendants suspended his license without considering his financial circumstances. Now, Mr. Robinson cannot get to the doctors, hospitals and pharmacies he needs because he does not have a driver's license. The Defendants' actions are directly imperiling Mr. Robinson's health and his access to life-sustaining treatment.

“The State takes licenses for nonpayment of traffic debt without providing Constitutionally-mandated safeguards like notice and an opportunity to be heard on the reason for nonpayment,” said **Claudia Wilner, Senior Attorney at NCLEJ**. “When applied to people like our clients—who did not pay only because they could not pay--these suspensions are fundamentally unfair.”

“These license suspensions are not punishment for any traffic-related infraction – they are a method of debt collection,” said **Premal Dharia, Director of Litigation at Civil Rights Corps**. “The practice is deeply unjust, not in the least because it fails to account for the countless Tennessee residents who simply cannot pay the debt. As a result, thousands of people cannot get to work or school, see their families, receive medical care, or otherwise fully participate in daily life in a state that lacks adequate public transportation. In essence, this lawsuit is about detaching the ability to drive from the ability to pay.”

“I see the destructive nature of this failed public policy nearly every day. Already struggling against poor mass transit and limited job opportunities in their neighborhoods, people are forced to drive across town to find work. Getting caught means hundreds of dollars in costs and fines and potentially jail. Not driving means not working,” says **Josh Spickler, Executive Director of Just City**. “This destructive public policy does nothing except erode our workforce and criminalize poverty. We look forward to challenging this law in court and bringing some much-needed relief to Tennessee’s working families.”

The lawsuit has been brought in the United States District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee at Nashville against the Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Safety, Rutherford and Wilson Counties and their Court Clerks, and Mt. Juliet and Lebanon, Tennessee, and their Clerks. The claims are brought under the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses of the United States Constitution, and ask the court to end the practice of suspending driver’s licenses without notice and without consideration of ability to pay.

To read the filings in this case, click [here](#).

[Civil Rights Corps](#), a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., engages in systemic, innovative civil rights litigation aimed at challenging the inhumanity that has become normalized in the American criminal legal system. Twitter: [@CivRightsCorps](#)

[Just City](#) was founded in 2015 by a group of activists, attorneys, and civic leaders. Our mission is to advance policies and programs within Shelby County and the State of Tennessee that strengthen the right to counsel and mitigate the damage caused to families and neighborhoods as a result of contact with the criminal justice system. Twitter: [@JustCity901](#)

[National Center for Law and Economic Justice](#) is a national advocacy organization that uses impact litigation, policy advocacy, and support for grassroots organizing to promote economic justice for low-income families, individuals, and communities across the country. Twitter: [@NCLEJustice](#)