

News Release

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DEAR Program Extends Court Debt Relief to 11,000 Residents with Suspended Licenses

DURHAM, N.C. — The [Durham Expunction and Restoration \(DEAR\) Program](#) has extended relief from court debt to more than 11,000 people whose drivers' licenses were suspended because of inability to pay traffic fines and fees.

During 33 court sessions over the past two years, the Durham County District Attorney's Office - a partner in the DEAR Program - has successfully motioned the court to waive a total of \$2.7 million in fines and fees preventing 11,084 individuals from being able to restore their drivers' licenses.

The last of these court sessions was held at the Durham County Courthouse on Monday, October 26 before District Court Judge Shamiaka Rhinehart, wrapping up an effort that began when DEAR identified these individuals as eligible for relief in 2018 and began working through their cases. This debt was tied to 14,629 traffic cases going back as far as thirty years, and each of these individuals has had a suspended license for at least two years.

"I am blown away with the success of the DEAR Program in helping thousands of people be able to get their drivers' licenses back," said City of Durham Mayor Steve Schewel. "I am so proud that DEAR was born out of the work of the City of Durham's Innovation Team and so grateful for all the partners in our court system who helped make this possible. This is racial and economic justice work of the highest order."

"Having a driver's license can transform a life," said Durham County District Attorney Satana Deberry. "Through DEAR, thousands of people in Durham now have better access to employment, education, and other opportunities. At the Durham DA's Office, our focus is community safety – and that includes the ability for all of us to fully participate in our economy and society. Thank you to the DEAR staff, Clerk's Office, judges, and Durham DA's Office staff for all their hard work to make this happen."

The DEAR Program, which offers free legal assistance with license restoration and expunctions, was launched in October 2018 after a City analysis that one-in-five Durham adults had a revoked or suspended license due to failure to pay court costs or attend traffic court. These suspensions disproportionately impacted people of color, and most arose from minor offenses, like driving without a license or having an expired registration, that are often tied to financial hardship.

"Justice coupled with mercy defines the pinnacle of a criminal justice system that works for all," said Superior Court Judge Josephine Kerr Davis, who helped launch the DEAR Program and now serves as co-chair of its Advisory Board. "From 2017, when I worked with others to sow the first seeds of restoration until now as a Superior Court Judge, this journey has been remarkable. Providing equal access to thousands of, and serving as a model for other court systems across the State, is indicative of how like-minded justice pursuers reimagine equity and fairness."

"Legal Aid of North Carolina is proud to be a member of the DEAR team and its significant efforts to provide mass debt relief to thousands of Durham residents who had no other financial means to regain their driving privileges," said Gina Reyman, managing attorney at Legal Aid of North Carolina, Inc. and a DEAR Advisory Board member. "It is a game-changer in our work to fight poverty and systemic racism and we salute the efforts of the City of Durham, the N.C. Justice Center, and the other partners in the court system to enable this relief to be provided."

To be eligible for relief from fines and fees, individuals must have had their driving privileges suspended for at least two years. Charges like driving while impaired and fleeing arrest are exempted from the program. The DEAR Program used these same eligibility criteria in 2018 when it worked to dismiss about 50,000 old charges tied to more than 30,000 active license suspensions.

“I am proud of the work that the DEAR Program and its partners accomplish every day to help more people have the same chance at obtaining employment, housing, and other opportunities in life as those with more means and privilege,” said District Court Judge Amanda Maris, who helped launch DEAR and serves co-chair of the program’s Advisory Board with Kerr Davis. “Access to a driver’s license is essential to ensuring those opportunities and a lack of financial resources should never be the sole barrier to that access.”

The DEAR Program will continue to provide assistance with license restoration and expunctions. For more information, visit <https://www.deardurham.org/>.

About the DEAR Program

The DEAR Program is a project of the City of Durham’s Innovation Team in collaboration with the North Carolina Justice Center, the Durham County Criminal Justice Resource Center, Legal Aid of North Carolina, Duke Law School, North Carolina Central University School of Law, the North Carolina Pro Bono Resource Center, the North Carolina Equal Access to Justice commission, the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, Bloomberg Philanthropies, The Center for Racial Justice Innovation, the Durham County District Attorney’s Office and local courts. People with license suspensions stemming from traffic charges in Durham County can find out if they have already received relief from the DEAR Program by visiting SecondChanceDriving.org. The DEAR program also offers free assistance with expunctions. Since 2018, DEAR attorneys and community partners have filed nearly 2,000 expunction petitions to help individuals expunge prior convictions and charges from their criminal records. More information, including program eligibility criteria, can be found at <https://www.deardurham.org/>.

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