

**Neal Rubin**

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# New law helping restore licenses

## Clinic putting Michiganders back behind the wheel

Jorge Ballesteros-Martinez couldn't afford car insurance, so he got a ticket he also couldn't afford for being uninsured, and then after he bought insurance the state yanked his driver's license for accumulated fines and fees. That meant he had to give a guy \$15 every day for a ride to work – where he drove forklifts.

Life is hard. Ironic, too. But sometimes, just out for a morning stroll, you catch a break.

A few steps from his home in southwest Detroit Wednesday, 12 years after he lost his license and several years after he took a buyout, Ballesteros-Martinez saw a sign planted in the dirt outside the LA SED Senior Center: “Driver's license restoration clinic HERE.”

He wondered if that applied to him. If it had something to do with that letter from the Michigan Department of State he tucked away a year ago. If, at 57, “am I too old?” If it was worth walking in, when he'd built a life where everything he needed was within a few minutes' stroll.

Yes, yes, no, yes. Barely an hour after a helpful staffer saw him wavering outside and steered him toward the entrance, Ballesteros-Martinez had his license back, and a handi-cap placard along with it.

He caught his break because someone had thrown it. Multiple someones, actually – the Michigan Legislature, the Secretary of State and Attorney General's offices, DTE Energy, Miller Canfield, the Detroit Justice Center, United Way – all recognizing that being poor is hard enough without making it insurmountable and criminal.

More than a thousand people came through the Department of State's Road to

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Restoration clinic, the 18th and last in a series this year scattered everywhere from Benton Harbor to Traverse City to Alpena to West Vernor Highway.

Some, like Ballesteros-Martinez, could be helped on the spot. Others with more complicated situations at least had their cases explained, and left knowing what steps they had to take.

"They get it. They made a mistake," said Khyla Craine, deputy legal director for the department. It might be as small as unpaid parking tickets or as cumbersome as an old drunk driving conviction, but "should that prevent them from being able to drive forever?"

In October of 2021, the Legislature said no, it shouldn't.

New laws did away with suspensions for unpaid tickets and court fines that weren't connected to unsafe driving. More than 350,000 Michiganders were affected, and letters were theoretically sent to all of them - but every case is different, not everyone is a lawyer, and even lawyers can find the process almost indecipherable.

"We have seen people with a 90-page driving record," Craine said. "We tell them, 'We can help, but it's going to take a minute.'"

## How restoring licenses keeps the electricity on

Not everyone gets a reinstatement. That's part of the law, and it's important to point out. But not everyone merits a suspension or deserves the long-term damage that can come with with it, and that's also part of the new approach.

At LA SED, there was one area in the agency's gymnasium labeled "Triage," a term typically associated with emergency rooms after bus crashes. The Secretary of State had a large booth where people could access their driving records. United Way was in a corner; in some cases, it was able to pay a driver's \$125 reinstatement fee.

Miller Canfield sent a swarm of lawyers, pro bono, and so did DTE Energy, which jumped into the issue after it realized how many would-be tree trimmers couldn't be hired because the job requires a commercial driver's license.

"We didn't put it all together until recently - that it's a major barrier for employment," said JoAnn Chavez, DTE's chief legal officer.

She said she met a 28-year-old at a restoration clinic in Ypsilanti who was ticketed shortly after earning her license, couldn't pay it, couldn't keep up with the resulting fines and fees, and had her driving privilege revoked.

"Can you imagine having one offense in your life and then it magnifies that way?" Chavez said.

In a state with, charitably, C-minus public transportation, losing a license can force people into either accepting unemployment or breaking the law.



**"They get it. They made a mistake,"** said Khyla Craine, deputy legal director for the Michigan Department of State. **It might be as small as unpaid parking tickets or as cumbersome as an old drunk driving conviction, but "should that prevent them from being able to drive forever?"** PHOTOS BY NEAL RUBIN/DFP

Yes, some people could have paid and didn't, and they get a break, too. Maybe karma will catch up to them.

Meantime, Tanya Bates of Southfield was so relieved Wednesday she nearly wept.

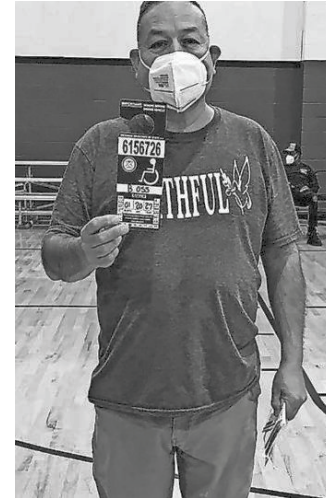
## How a forgotten license begat a fugitive

Bates is a retired LPN whose barber husband, Edward Gardner, was ticketed 20 years ago for not having his license with him when he was pulled over.

The fines grew to \$710, an annoyance if you have it and a life-altering burden if you don't.

He drove anyway, she said, carefully, only to work and back. "I got tired of him looking over his shoulder," she said, and tired of worrying, so here they were at LA SED, with hundreds of people consulting with lawyers or waiting to consult or waiting for the balky computer systems to kick into gear.

"I would wait all day," she said, but she didn't have to. In fairly



**A law passed last year helped Jorge Ballesteros-Martinez get his driver's license back Wednesday, 12 years after he couldn't keep up with traffic fines and it was revoked. He was equally excited about being issued a handicapped placard.**

short order, they learned that when the law passed, his \$710 debt vanished.

"He'll be walking out of here with his license," she said. "I could just cry."

Sometimes it's the unfairness of a law that makes you weep, but this one worked. Nobody will miss the \$710, but a barber who was absent-minded one day 20 years ago gets his mind eased and his record cleared and his horizons broadened to wherever the roadways reach.

"I'm celebrating," Bates said.

Her husband wasn't so lucky: He had a job to get to. But at least he could drive himself there, whistling as he went.

*Neal Rubin once went to traffic court and tried to plead insanity - which, be advised, did not amuse the judge. Reach him at [NARubin@freepress.com](mailto:NARubin@freepress.com), or on Twitter at [@nealrubin\\_fp](https://twitter.com/nealrubin_fp).*

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