

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6189

As of January 29, 2018

Title: An act relating to driving a motor vehicle with a suspended or revoked driver's license.

Brief Description: Changing driving a motor vehicle with a suspended or revoked driver's license provisions.

Sponsors: Senators Fain, Frockt, Pedersen, Palumbo, Hasegawa, Darneille, Rivers, Mullet and Saldaña.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Law & Justice: 1/29/18.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Changes Driving While License Suspended or Revoked in the third degree (DWLS 3) from a misdemeanor to a traffic infraction subject to a penalty of \$250.
- Requires the court to reduce the penalty to \$50 if the person provides the court with written proof that his or her license has been reinstated.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON LAW & JUSTICE

Staff: Shani Bauer (786-7468)

Background: It is a crime for a person to drive a motor vehicle in this state while that person's privilege to drive is suspended or revoked. There are three degrees of the crime of Driving While License Suspended or Revoked (DWLS), which are dependent on the reason the person's license was suspended or revoked.

First degree DWLS is a gross misdemeanor offense and involves driving when an order of license revocation is in effect for being a habitual traffic offender.

Second degree DWLS, also a gross misdemeanor offense, generally involves driving when the person's license is suspended or revoked based on a conviction of any of a number of relatively serious traffic offenses or based on administrative action taken by the Department of Licensing (DOL).

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

DWLS 3 is a misdemeanor offense and generally involves driving after a license is suspended or revoked for secondary reasons where there is no set suspension period. More specifically, those reasons include:

- the person failed to furnish proof of satisfactory progress in a required alcoholism or drug treatment program;
- the person failed to furnish proof of financial responsibility for the future;
- the person failed to comply with the provisions relating to uninsured accidents;
- the person failed to respond to a notice of traffic infraction for a moving violation, failed to appear at a requested hearing, violated a written promise to appear in court, or failed to comply with the terms of a notice of traffic infraction or citation;
- the person committed an offense in another state that, if committed in this state, would not be grounds for the suspension or revocation of the person's driver's license,
- the person has been suspended or revoked by reason of one or more of the items listed in the DWLS in the second degree offense, but was eligible to reinstate the person's driver's license or driving privilege at the time of the violation;
- the person has received traffic citations or notices of traffic infraction relating to intermediate driver's licenses that resulted in a suspension; or
- the person is not in compliance with a child support order.

At various times, the Legislature has attempted to establish avenues to avoid suspension or facilitate return of a person's license when the license is revoked for secondary reasons. In 2009, the Legislature adopted a relicensing diversion program for persons who commit DWLS 3 and whose license was suspended or revoked for failing to respond, appear, or comply with a notice of traffic infraction. In 2011, the Legislature authorized the prosecutor to direct DWLS 3 cases resulting from a traffic infraction to the prosecutor's office for consideration of filing an information or entry into a pre-charge diversion program rather than filing charges.

In order for a person to reinstate a driver's license after it has been suspended or revoked, the person must clear the underlying reason for the suspension—usually the payment of money, show proof of financial responsibility, and pay a reinstatement fee of \$75 for non-alcohol related suspensions, or \$150 for alcohol related suspensions.

Summary of Bill: DWLS 3 is changed from a misdemeanor to a traffic infraction subject to a penalty of \$250. If the person appears in person before the court or submits by mail written proof that they have reinstated their license after being cited, the court shall reduce the penalty to \$50.

The relicensing diversion program is renamed the relicensing program. Participation in the relicensing program is at the discretion of the court rather than the prosecuting attorney.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: The bill contains several effective dates. Please refer to the bill.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: There are reasons you should be put in jail and there are reasons you should have penalties other than jail. Many DWLS 3 offenders are first time offenders and not in a financial position to make payments to court. Costs snowball to the point where they find themselves in jail. The cycle of jail and fines begins a downward slide into poverty making it difficult for a person to get a job or get housing. Driving while poor should not be a crime. Removing this crime will result in considerable cost savings for local government. It is smart on crime by allowing local agencies to focus more on greater public safety issues. It also addresses social, economic, and racial disproportionality issues.

License suspension doesn't reduce the incidence of law violations. We should move away from suspending people's licenses for financial reasons. License suspension should only be done as a traffic safety issue. There's no safety difference between someone who runs a red light and pays a ticket and someone who runs a red light and doesn't pay a ticket. There are other ways to incentivize payment. Many states have decriminalized DWLS 3, including Indiana, Maine, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Oregon. Getting rid of the criminal penalty will free up time and resources for other criminal justice matters.

Defendants in these cases are not flaunting the court system. Judges and collections agencies are not always responsive to requests for payment plans. DWLS 3 is the most common crime charged in Washington State today. Nights in jail cost people jobs and housing. impaired driving and distracted driving are the most hazardous conditions on roadway. Police should concentrate efforts there.

CON: Removing the criminal penalty will create a disincentive for people to pay their fines and will result in a large loss of revenue for the court and the state. This is one of the few incentives to get people to provide insurance. Washington is currently one of the highest states in the nation for uninsured drivers. There are other options like attaching lower jail time or vacating a person's record once the charges are paid in full. License suspension as a consequence of a traffic infraction is 100 percent avoidable by showing personal responsibility. A person's license may only be suspended for a nonmoving violation. Moving violations directly involve public safety. The statute mandates opportunities to allow people to pay over time. As a judge, it is easy to see patterns as to how people pay just enough to avoid criminal penalties. Remove the criminal penalties and you will remove the incentive for payment. It is rarely the first time offender who is in court on a DWLS 3.

OTHER: There are eight different ways to commit DWLS 3. The majority of the conversation is focused on the failure to address traffic infractions. A solution should focus solely on that reason. The majority of prosecutors believe if you are not trying to criminalize the underlying act, you should not trigger the due process encumbrances of the criminal justice system. If you are diverting all of the cases, it shouldn't be criminal activity to begin with.

This is an appropriate mechanism in order to incentivize people to be insured. As an alternative, the Legislature could institute progressive penalties, starting as an infraction and proceeding to a misdemeanor. Failure to provide proof of insurance as an underlying reason should stay a misdemeanor.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Joe Fain, Prime Sponsor; Virla Spencer, Center for Justice; Paul Benz, Faith Action Network; Elysa Hovard, Cocoon House; Elisabeth Smith, ACLU of Washington; Kallie Ferguson, Washington Defenders Association; Juliana Roe, Washington State Association of Counties; Brittney Miller, citizen.

CON: Kelsi Hamilton, Washington Collectors Association; R.W. Buzzard, Lewis County District Court Judge.

OTHER: Tom McBride, Washington Association of Pros Attorneys; Corey Guilmette, Attorney, Public Defender Association; John Schochet, City of Seattle; Caitlin Lang, State Board of Health; Doug Levy, City of Kent; James McMahan, Washington Association of Sheriffs & Police Chiefs; Arthur West, citizen.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.