



## **MAKING UNLICENSED DRIVERS LEGAL - PILOT DIVERSION PROGRAM TACKLES COMMON PROBLEM WITH INTERVENTION**

**St. Paul Pioneer Press (MN)** - Friday, June 12, 2009

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Local prosecutors and law enforcement officials say driving without a valid license is an offense they see often, and many times the same people are being caught over and over again.

In many cases, drivers get back behind the wheel because they don't have the money to pay the hefty fines, said Kori Land, city attorney in South St. Paul and West St. Paul.

Help is around the corner for drivers who get their licenses suspended or revoked after an offense in St. Paul, Duluth, Inver Grove Heights, South St. Paul and West St. Paul.

"These are people who get caught in a system that they cannot get out of or don't know how to get out of," Land said.

A two-year pilot program that begins July 1 is aimed at helping eligible drivers get valid licenses again by putting them into a payment plan and giving them a temporary license.

St. Paul City Attorney John Choi's office initiated the driving diversion program, which was included in the state's public safety omnibus bill that passed in May.

Choi said more than one-third of the cases presented to the St. Paul city attorney's office each year involve drivers who don't have valid licenses or who don't have insurance, which often go hand in hand.

"We found that essentially a lot of these individuals would be offered the opportunity to pay a fine, but they wouldn't pay the fine," Choi said. "And guess what happens then? Their license will get suspended again."

Driving after suspension or revocation are payable offenses that carry a \$200 fine, plus a \$75 surcharge. However, the offenses are considered misdemeanors, so if a driver goes to court and loses, they carry a maximum punishment of 90 days in jail and a \$1,000 fine.

Here's how the program will work:

A prosecutor will determine whether to accept someone into the program and consider factors such as criminal history.

Participants must pay a \$150 fee to enter the program, which would allow their most recent fine to be dropped. They would have to pay their old fines and fees, however, through a payment schedule that would allow them to spread out the cost. They also must complete a four-hour education class and provide proof of insurance.

Drivers can obtain a valid license and insurance through the program. Once completed, the latest citation will be dismissed, and it will not show up on a driving record.

Someone with a drunken driving offense might be eligible for the program after serving out the revocation period. Those who have commercial licenses or have multiple drunken driving offenses, misdemeanors or child

endangerment offenses will not be eligible.

Financial Crime Services, a private vendor out of Red Wing, Minn., that also handles the "worthless check" program for St. Paul and several other cities, will manage the program.

The state commissioner of public safety and staff from the five communities must report back to legislative committees with results of the program, including recidivism rates, by February 2011.

Land said the goal, besides helping people to drive legally, is to free up the court calendars.

"The biggest complaint from judges and public defenders and court staff is the volume," Land said. "So if we can reduce the volume of the court calendars by just eliminating a third of these tickets, it will help."

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**Edition:** *St. Paul*

**Section:** *Local*

**Page:** *B1*

**Record Number:** *0906110426*

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