

Steering clear: The drive for a better future



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by Judge Renee DiSalvo, Youngstown Municipal Court

This week, Big Ideas had the honor of sitting down with Judge Renee DiSalvo of the Youngstown Municipal Court to talk about her work removing barriers like suspended drivers' licenses for Mahoning County residents. Judge DiSalvo was appointed to the bench in November of 2018 and won the 2019 election to serve the term beginning January 1, 2020. Since taking the bench, she's accomplished much for the Court and community, including developing her much-needed and deeply impactful "Steering Clear Clinic" to help individuals obtain a valid drivers' license to maximize self-sufficiency and economic well-being. Barriers to driving legally are a major hurdle for many low-income and working poor Americans. [Recent reports suggest over one million Ohioans](#) have their licenses suspended.

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CLA: Judge, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today. Many of our volunteer attorneys know about your Steering Clear Clinic because they help out. But many of our readers may not. Tell us the basics of this clinic and how it came to be.

Judge: Absolutely. When I took the bench, the Judge I replaced had the SLIP court in place. SLIP stands for Suspended License Intervention Program. From my days as defense counsel, I had practiced in this court. Defendants struggling with a suspended license (and often a cycle of license suspensions) could enroll in SLIP court and learn why suspensions happen and how valid licenses can be obtained. If they could become valid, any tickets picked up would be dismissed. It was, and still is, very impactful.

When I took the bench, I expanded the SLIP court so more people could qualify. Again, as defense counsel, I saw firsthand that one of the biggest hindrances to my clients was not having a license. This means no way to get to a job, no way to get to interviews, no way to take the kids to school or daycare.

Soon after expanding SLIP court, I heard about a clinic another local Judge was holding for their community. I thought - let me try that here. We need this in Youngstown too. My new clinic, now called the Steering Clear Clinic, was another expansion on SLIP.

The Steering Clear Clinic is open to the public - so all those who need help but aren't necessarily involved in the court system can now access assistance. We got the BMV involved, we collaborated with the other municipal courts in Mahoning County, and we garnered support from attorneys who would be on-site to advise attendees on how to clean up warrant blocks or other issues preventing them from getting a valid

license. Participants sit down with an attorney and have them review their driving records. They find out what they need to do to restore their license.

We had over 200 people show up at the first one. This was about four years ago. It was slated to be an all day event - super successful but also crazy. We knew we wanted and needed to have another, but we needed to find ways to limit size and scope while also gradually reaching everyone in need. Over time, we've evolved our model. Today, we hold the clinic in varying spots around the city. We have been very fortunate with churches donating their space. All our locations are on the bus line, and we try to limit it to around 50 people. Clinics run roughly every other month from April through October or November.

CLA: What are some common issues your clinic participants are facing?

Judge: There are a number of [different types of license suspensions someone might have](#). The most common is probably a result of outstanding fines and court costs like parking and driving tickets. Things they just didn't take care of or maybe didn't even know about. Sometimes, people are facing high reinstatement fees after letting insurance lapse. When a participant is struggling with unpaid fines and court costs, we've been able to get the majority of local courts to allow them to get on payment plans. Maybe they can't pay everything up front, but with a certificate showing they attended the clinic many courts will allow them drive legally if they agree to and keep up with a payment plan.

CLA: The need sounds so high. Do you think the clinic has curbed need in the community?

Judge: The need is still there. The BMV can be difficult to navigate. Many of the local BMV offices are closed. Those that are open are privately owned and often staffed by people who aren't trained to understand the records and don't know how to help.

CLA: How is the clinic operated?

Judge: We rely on volunteer attorneys from our local Bar and CLA to provide free legal advice. We've also enlisted [MYCAP](#) (Mahoning-Youngstown Community Action Partnership) to help. They have funds available to help people pay off fines, pay down court costs, and get insurance. This can be so critical. We also have an employment agency on site, the Child Support Enforcement Agency, [Home for Good](#) (which helps link people reentering society up with resources), and Goodwill is there with job openings. We really have a lot of different agencies to help with an array of holistic barriers. Even insurance companies attend for participants who need to get some sort of insurance.

CLA: From your perspective, how do license issues impact community members?

Judge: I have so many stories that illustrate this. Inevitably at every clinic, there is at least one person who is so thankful and willing to share how the clinic impacted them. The first year we did this, one woman came up to me who had not had her license for over 15 years. She was working two less desirable part-time jobs because she couldn't drive so she needed jobs on the bus line or within walking distance. Working two jobs, barely making ends meet - to her our clinic meant she was able to get her license, start driving, and get one stable job. She came back to tell me her success story and brought her son to help him get valid. You're making a change - impacting lives here. There was one older gentleman who just came in about a month ago. He was so overwhelmed, it had been years since he was valid. He was able to get on a payment plan. He was so grateful. He said if it hadn't been for the program he would never have been able to obtain his license.

CLA: I can just imagine the relief someone must feel.

Judge: Yes! You hear these stories every day. The general public doesn't realize the level of relief some people will feel. These fees mount up so quickly. Some people don't even know their license is suspended. They might have moved, maybe they didn't contact the BMV or get any notices about lapsed insurance. It's quite the revolving door for many members of the working poor. The community sometimes doesn't realize how hard it can be for people to navigate these processes. These hardships cause them to struggle more than they are already struggling.

CLA: The clinic sounds like one wildly successful solution. What else would you like to see?

Judge: I always wish we had more volunteers. And I wish the BMV would come and see what we are doing so they could understand our importance and actually support us instead of consistently making it difficult for us to continue these clinics. They need to see the importance of the clinics in the community. This could help us push policies that are more likely to help rather than hurt people.

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