A License to Move Out of Poverty

Several years ago a friend brought to my attention the need to address the barriers to obtaining and maintaining a driver’s license. I fondly remember my driver education class in high school when I successfully completed parallel parking on the first attempt. A lot has changed since I received my driver’s permit. Many high schools across the state no longer offer driver education courses as part of the regular curriculum during the academic year. This in part is due to insufficient state funding and increased liability expenses to school districts. Many students are able to afford private driving academies, with a price tag of approximately $400. However, low-income students cannot afford it. There are many other barriers to successfully completing driver education courses: the lack of a vehicle to accumulate drive time behind the wheel with a licensed adult and to take a road test, lack of time available to participate in driver education courses after school or in the summer, or an inability to find transportation to classes offered through continuing education or other community programs. After a meeting with families about barriers to employment I discovered that some families do not want their teenagers to obtain a driver’s license because auto insurance premiums automatically increase when there is another driver in the household, even if the teenage driver is not driving the insured vehicle.

In Duluth, having a driver’s license is crucial to finding and maintaining employment. A driver’s license is often a requirement to apply for a job, even if the job does not involve driving. The city of Duluth is making significant progress on reviewing job classifications for positions with the city to determine whether a driver’s license is a necessity. I hope other employers will do the same.

A driver’s license enables individuals to seek employment that pays a living wage. Not all good-paying jobs are on a bus route. Many jobs in construction, for instance, require a vehicle to get to the job site.

Having a driver’s license is important in moving out of poverty. Obtaining and maintaining a driver’s license was one of the top issues identified for community action at the recent forum, “Living into the Difficult: Race, Diversity and Duluth for All.” Unfortunately this issue is not getting sufficient attention at the state level. In the last legislative session there was an emphasis on addressing racial economic disparities. A number of bills were introduced to increase funding for job training programs, an important component. However, without a driver’s license, many young adults are unable to participate in these important programs. We also have incredible union-sponsored apprentice and training programs but these also require a driver’s license and vehicle to get to the training facilities.

In the 2016 legislative session I introduced a bill (HF 3995) to appropriate funds to help subsidize the cost of driver education courses (through schools or private academies) for low-income students ($100-$300) and to develop a working group to study the availability of driver education courses in Minnesota. Unfortunately the bill never received a hearing in the GOP-controlled House.

Minnesota is ranked at the bottom (#48, tied with New York and Texas) in the percent of licensed drivers, with only 59% of eligible drivers holding a license. Approximately 90% of the clients served by CHUM do not have a driver’s license. Based on data from Duluth neighborhoods compiled by Minnesota Compass (MNCompass.org), 31.4% of households in the central hillside do not have a vehicle compared to 13.3% for the entire city of Duluth. The
number of central hillside households that rely on public transportation is two times the number for the entire city of Duluth. The central hillside is composed of households with a median income of only $27,618 with 62% of households under 200% of the federal poverty level. And it has the highest proportion of non-white households.

The inability of obtaining a driver's license reduces the likelihood of continuing post-secondary education and training, and finding living-wage employment. This directly affects the ability of low-income individuals in our community to move out of poverty.

Our Duluth community is organizing to address disparities in obtaining and maintaining a driver’s license. A Transportation Table is in the process of being formed with the assistance of Jenny Van Sickle at Community Action Duluth and Mark Engebretson at CHUM. I will need the support of our community to advocate for positive change. Getting educated about this topic is the first step. Look for opportunities to get involved in the near future or contact me directly.

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