

Get your license back: Suspensions for unpaid criminal traffic tickets

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Learn how to get your license back if it was suspended for unpaid fines from criminal traffic tickets or convictions.

1. Ticket types

How do I know if my ticket was criminal or non-criminal?

If you think your license is suspended due to an unpaid ticket, it's important to know what type of ticket you got. It could have been a **non-criminal** traffic ticket or a **criminal** traffic ticket. Different rules apply to each type of ticket.

1. **Non-Criminal traffic tickets.** These are also called “traffic infractions” or “civil” traffic violations. These are tickets for things like speeding, faulty equipment, not having insurance, and parking tickets.

Usually, a **non-criminal infraction** notice will have a fine amount listed on the ticket itself.

If you have unpaid fines related to a non-criminal traffic ticket, you can ask for a payment plan or community service to pay the fine.

You also might be able to get your license back.

2. **Criminal traffic tickets** are traffic violations that are handled in criminal court. These are often also called criminal traffic “convictions.” Some types

of criminal traffic violations are driving while under the influence (DUI), hit and run, driving with a suspended license and reckless driving.

You have a right to a free public defense lawyer when you appear in court to respond to a criminal traffic offense.

If there's no fine amount listed and the notice says that a court appearance is required, then it is a criminal traffic ticket.

You can ask for a payment plan or community service to pay the fine if you have a suspension from unpaid fines related to a **non-criminal** traffic ticket.

2. Check your license status

I got a criminal traffic ticket but I didn't respond to it. I'm not sure if my license is suspended. How can I find out?

There are multiple ways you can find out. First, **try to check the notice you received about the unpaid traffic ticket**. See if the notice lists the type of ticket. If it is a criminal traffic ticket, confirm that your license was actually suspended by contacting the court who issued the notice or ticket.

How do I check the status of my license?

If you're not sure about the status of your license, **do not drive**. Check the status of your license online by running a search at the Department of Licensing (https://fortress.wa.gov/dol/extdriveses/ESP/NoLogon/_/) (DOL) or call 360-902-3900.

If you call, be patient. Listen to the entire pre-recorded message and follow instructions. You will get through to a person eventually. For either option, you will need your Washington driver's license number and your date of birth.

This information is free to access. You won't need account or login information.

Update your address with DOL to make sure DOL always has the address where you get your mail. You don't want to miss important information about the status of your license.

Don't try to get this information from a collection agency. Different courts use different agencies. A collection agency only has information about tickets assigned to it.

Out of state suspension: If your driver's license from another state is suspended, Washington also suspends your license. This is true even if Washington DOL has issued you a license that looks valid. You must contact that state's driver license agency to find out how to fix your suspension.

3. Suspended licenses

My license is suspended, but I need to drive now. What can I do?

Depending on why your license was suspended, you can apply to DOL for an Occupational/Restricted License or an Interlock Driver License (<https://www.dol.wa.gov/driverslicense/restricted.html>). You must meet the eligibility requirements. Financial help is available if you have a low income.

How do I reinstate my license if it was suspended for criminal traffic fines?

Call the clerk's office for the court that fined you. It should be a **Superior Court**. Ask them what you need to do to reinstate your license. Ask them if they have a Relicensing Program. A Relicensing Program can help lower your fine and set up a payment plan. Not all courts have this program.

If you can't reach a clerk, you could go to the courthouse. **But if there is a bench warrant against you due to the ticket, they may arrest you at the courthouse.** If you never responded to your traffic ticket, there could be a bench warrant for you.

4. Relicensing Programs

How do I start the Relicensing Program if my court has one?

If the court that suspended your license has a Relicensing Program, ask the clerk or the manager of the program:

- Who can take part in it
- What is required
- How to start or file for the program
- What to bring to court for the program

How do I get ready for a Relicensing Program?

Your goal at the program is to convince the court to take the fine out of collections. You can also ask the court to:

- Waive all collection fees and interest
- Set up a payment plan on the fine only
- Let you work off the fine through community service

What proof do I need for the Relicensing Program?

- **Bring proof of your financial situation.** If you can't pay the fine in full, bring proof that you get public assistance, proof of rent or mortgage bills, utility bills, pay stubs, tax forms, debts, and so on. **Examples of public assistance include** food assistance, ABD, TANF, and SSI/SSDI. Bring documents that show your financial situation and hardship.
- Have an explanation ready for your underlying ticket or driving record. The judge may ask you to explain your ticket and your driving record.

This is especially true if you

- have gotten many traffic tickets recently
- have gotten more than one ticket for the same thing
- were driving without a license or insurance
- **Bring proof of valid license, insurance, or tabs.** If the underlying ticket was for driving without a license, insurance, or current tabs, you should bring proof that you now have or at the time you got the ticket had a license, insurance, or tabs.

5. If there is no relicensing program

There is no relicensing program for my court. Now what?

If there is no relicensing program **and your case is a criminal traffic case**, you can ask for a General Rule 39 (https://www.courts.wa.gov/court_rules/?fa=court_rules.list&group=ga&set=GR) (GR 39) hearing to address a traffic ticket that is suspending your license. **Not all courts will grant this hearing.** If you have already had a hearing on the ticket, you might not get another one.

Some courts may have you ask in writing. If so, ask the court clerk if they can give you copies of the forms you need. Many courts have this information available on their website.

If they don't have any forms, you can ask the court to reduce your fines and fees to the extent the law allows using our LFO reductions guide.

6. Collections and garnishment

The fines already went to collections. Should I try to work something out with the collection agency?

If the court will not pull it from the collection agency because the judge already made a ruling about it, you may have limited options. You could get legal help.

You can also try to deal with the collection agencies directly. Here are some tips for dealing with collection agencies:

- **Keep records.** Keep records of all your phone calls, letters and interactions with collection agencies.
- **Offer a Payoff.** Collection agencies will often take less than the full amount owed if you offer to pay a lower amount in full immediately. “Full amount” means the original fine amount, collection fees, and interest. Half the full amount is usually a good first offer. If the first person you talk to doesn’t offer a payoff amount you can afford, ask for a supervisor. They will often offer something better.
- **Offer a Monthly Payment Plan.** If you set up a payment plan, you will probably end up paying more than you would through a “payoff.” With a payment plan, you must pay off the full fine amount. This includes fees and interest. On the upside, the agency will release your license as soon as you make the first payment.
- When setting up a payment plan, you may have to make a down payment of about 10% of the total owed and show proof you can make future payments.

Try to limit giving any specific account identifiers to collection agencies (like bank account or debit card numbers). Try to show proof of your ability to pay without providing actual account numbers themselves. *There is a risk of being overcharged by a collection agency if they have your account information*

- **Don’t agree to pay more than you can afford.** If you miss a payment, your license will be re-suspended. The collection agency might not want to work out a new agreement.
- **Avoid Garnishment.** Collection agencies can “garnish” your wages and bank accounts to pay your unpaid fines. Keep this from happening by making payments.
- **Don’t** give a collection agency unnecessary information about your job, bank accounts, or other sources of income. Try to avoid specific account numbers or identifiers. You don’t have to tell debt collectors where you work or how much you make.
- **Don’t** pay by check or with a debit card. *There is a risk of being overcharged by a collection agency if they have your account or debit card information. It may be difficult to prove any unauthorized charges if a collection agency charges you more or more often than you authorized.*

- Make payments by credit card or money order if you can. This can prevent overcharging by the collection agency.

My tickets are in garnishment or “judgment.”

Once a court has issued a writ of garnishment, a collection agency can directly take money from your wages, bank accounts, or certain other sources of income. Some of your income might be protected from garnishment depending on how much you earn. Garnishment and exceptions to garnishment **can be complicated**. Try to get legal help if you have a low income and your wages are being garnished.

If your wages or bank account are garnished, the court might not be able to pull that ticket from collections even if you ask them to. It will depend on if they can do it all and whether the judge can grant the order.

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