

# News Release

For Immediate Release: March 13, 2019

## **Durham Launches New Website and Courthouse Office Dedicated to Second Chances and Driver's License Restorations**

*New Website, <https://secondchancedriving.org>, to Help Residents Regain Driving Privileges*

DURHAM, N.C. – Durham residents in need of help expunging charges and convictions and restoring their driving privileges now have a new program to help them get back on their feet.

According to the North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles, approximately 1-in-5 adults in Durham County have a revoked or suspended driver's license. According to data from the City of Durham Innovation Team (I-Team), 80 percent of those with revoked or suspended licenses are African American and Hispanic, and many of these suspensions stem from unpaid tickets that are on average 16 years old with some more than 30 years old.

Beginning today, the City of Durham-funded [Durham Expunction and Restoration \(DEAR\) Program](#) is officially opening its new office to the public and launching a new website to help these residents restore their driving privileges, which can help remove barriers to employment and housing.

"Making the city we love a city for all means making the city we love a city of second chances," said Mayor Steve Schewel. "If our neighbors cannot find work and cannot find housing, how can we ever become a city of shared economic prosperity? We must do more to ensure that the legal relief provided under law is available to all of our residents, not just those who can afford a private attorney. The DEAR Program is doing just that through an unprecedented level of collaboration and innovative approaches."

The DEAR Program, located inside the Durham County Courthouse at 510 S. Dillard St., Suite 6400, will now have walk-in hours Monday through Friday from 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. to provide free expunction and driver's license restoration legal services to Durham residents who cannot afford private attorneys. In addition to its new office location, the DEAR Program's first major initiative to advance this work is the launch of the program's new website, <https://secondchancedriving.org>.

According to the City's I-Team Director Ryan Smith, the DEAR Program's new "second chance driving" website, available in English and Spanish, is supporting a transformational initiative that is already underway in the Durham County District Attorney's Office to resolve old traffic charges that are causing long-term driver's license suspensions for Durham residents. This new website allows people to search for themselves to see if they have received any relief under the initiative.

According to Smith, between December 2018 and February 2019, the Durham County District Attorney's Office dismissed over 50,000 traffic cases preventing more than 30,000 people from restoring their driving privileges. During the same period, the Durham County District Attorney's Office and the DEAR Program partnered to begin asking the Durham County District Court to eliminate all unpaid fines and fees for over 15,000 old traffic cases for over 11,000 people.

"This debt largely burdens poor people with repayments they may never make," said Durham County District Attorney Satana Deberry. "With their debts forgiven, these individuals can now get a driver's license. They can get

insurance. They can go to work and to school. They can participate fully in the economic and social vitality of our community.”

To date, the program has brought over 1,500 of these cases before the court that are on average over 13 years old. Over the next 18 months, the Durham County District Attorney’s Office plans to continue motioning the Durham County District Court to eliminate the unpaid fines and fees for the remaining 13,500 cases. The elimination of unpaid traffic court debt eliminates any driver’s license suspension that was being triggered because the traffic case was unresolved.

“Any charges or traffic tickets less than two years old or involving a DWI or other high-risk traffic offense are ineligible under this program,” said Smith. “The program is entirely consistent with public safety and accountability. Not being able to drive for two years is a steep penalty to pay, especially for what in many cases amounts to minor traffic violations.”

The new “second chance driving” website developed by the DEAR program and Code the Dream will also inform residents whether or not they have an old, unpaid traffic court debt that the Durham District Attorney’s Office has pre-identified, and will soon ask the Durham County District Court to eliminate in the coming 12-18 months. Residents can sign up to receive automatic updates on the status of their case if their case has not yet been brought to the court.

Residents who have received relief through this initiative will also be provided an opportunity to attend a free legal clinic sponsored by the DEAR Program, where they can meet with an attorney to review their statewide driving record and identify any other reasons their driver’s license is suspended.

“Through unique collaborations and innovations, the DEAR program is breaking a perpetual cycle of driver’s license suspensions that hurts people and families,” said DEAR Advisory Board Member Daniel Bowes of the North Carolina Justice Center.

Later this month, the DEAR program plans to work with community organizers to canvas Durham neighborhoods in order to get the word out to residents about the program and website. “It is important to have those who are directly affected by the issue involved in getting the word out to build trust between the communities that most need the services and the program,” said Chuck Manning, Sr., community outreach coordinator for the City’s I-Team.

In addition to the large number of Durham residents who have a long-term suspended driver’s license, the City’s I-Team estimates that tens of thousands of residents have charges or convictions on their record that currently show up on background checks, but are eligible for expunction.

The District Attorney’s Office and Public Defender’s Office, as part of a new court referral program developed under the leadership of Judge Amanda Maris, are identifying residents – already at the courthouse for other reasons -- who might be eligible for the DEAR Program’s services, and referring them to the DEAR Program office inside the courthouse.

“Prior to the inception of the DEAR Program, there was not a systemic mechanism in place within the court system to refer parties to this type of legal relief in North Carolina,” said Judge Maris. “Historically, parties typically learned of eligibility for an expunction or a certificate of relief months or years after the moment of eligibility. With far too many people, either unaware of this relief or unable to afford to pay for it, DEAR will hopefully alleviate and remove these barriers prohibiting access to the justice system.”

In addition to legal services offered in the courthouse, the DEAR Program also partners with local university law schools and non-profit legal service providers to offer free legal clinics in the community as part of the DEAR network. So far, DEAR has supported three community clinics in partnership with the North Carolina Pro Bono Resource Center, Legal Aid of North Carolina, Duke University School of Law, and volunteer attorneys from the

District Attorney and Public Defender’s Offices. The DEAR Program will also begin partnering with community organizations later this spring to hold community-based intakes where residents can complete the intake process to receive free legal services from the DEAR Program.

As part of the program’s strategy to increase access to expungement and driver’s license restoration legal services, DEAR leverages volunteer attorneys, paralegals, and law school students. “To reach the scale we need, we aspire to create a model pro bono community in Durham,” said Smith. People interested in learning more about opportunities to volunteer to support DEAR’s mission should visit <http://www.deardurham.org>, or tune in to a Facebook Live conversation on Thursday, March 14 at noon with DEAR attorneys at <https://www.facebook.com/CityofDurhamNC>.

According to Smith, the DEAR Program is fueled by a dynamic level of collaboration. DEAR’s Advisory Board, co-chaired by Judge Amanda Maris and Judge Josephine Kerr Davis, includes representatives from the City of Durham, Legal Aid of North Carolina, North Carolina Justice Center, North Carolina Pro Bono Resource Center, Durham County Criminal Justice Resource Center, Durham County District Attorney’s Office, Durham County Public Defender’s Office, Durham County Clerk of Court’s Office, North Carolina Central University School of Law, Duke University School of Law, Southern Coalition for Social Justice, All of Us or None, Durham County Bar Association, George H. White Bar Association, and the DEAR Program staff attorneys. The board meets monthly to provide general direction and guidance to the DEAR Program.

The efforts leading up to public opening of the DEAR Program offices and website launch began in the winter of 2018. Last fall, the City provided funds to launch the DEAR Program with a team of four attorneys – two from the City Attorney’s Office, one from the North Carolina Justice Center, and one from Legal Aid of North Carolina as well as one paralegal to provide free legal services to residents. This team is based out of the Durham County Courthouse in an office provided at no cost by Durham County Criminal Justice Resource Center. The DEAR Program began setting up the office in December 2018, and with the full team now in place, the office is now officially opening to the public.

The DEAR Program was developed out of research and work led by the City’s I-Team in collaboration with numerous community partners, and was informed by stories and ideas of Durham residents with experiences of justice-involvement. To fund this work, the City received a grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies in 2017 to create the I-Team, which began in the summer of 2017, and was asked by then Mayor William V. ‘Bill’ Bell to focus on improving economic opportunity for justice-involved residents. DEAR is the first major program developed by the I-Team, and residents can learn more about the I-Team’s work at [www.durhamiteam.org](http://www.durhamiteam.org).

###

101 City Hall Plaza, Second Floor, Durham, NC 27701

919.560.4123

[DurhamNC.gov](http://DurhamNC.gov)

Follow Us @CityofDurhamNC

