



March 29, 2022

Chair Representative Frank Hornstein
545 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Mr. Chair Rep. Hornstein and Committee Members:

My name is Otis Zanders, and I am the CEO at Ujamaa Place. It is with great pleasure that I write this letter in support of amending H.F. No. 4571 as proposed.

Since 2010, Ujamaa Place has provided transformation support services to young, predominantly African American men, helping them build positive lives for themselves and move into contributing roles in society. We proudly serve as a diversion partner for the Ramsey County JAG Diversion Program and the City of St. Paul Criminal Justice Re-entry Partnership, helping men ages 18-30 exit the criminal justice system and re-enter society. Converting to a data-centric organization revolutionized our work circa 2017, providing quantifying data to track participant progress and measure impact. Employment is one of the metrics used to measure participant success and is critical to successful re-entry. From the data, we know that participants who are employed are less likely to re-offend and that being unlicensed is a significant barrier to employment.

With the current laws in place, many of our participants are unable to obtain a driver's license. In order to aid participants with successful re-entry, Ujamaa Place provides rides, bus fare, and other resources to help participants get to and from interviews and jobs. Without these supports in place, participants are less likely to obtain and maintain a job, threatening the likelihood of successful re-entry. These supports are unsustainable over time, however, because of the number of participants in our program. Due to the disproportionate impact of the current laws on the population we serve, participant needs far exceeds our available resources.

According to 2021 data, Ujamaa Place has served over 5,000 men and maintains a 4% recidivism rate, compared to 44% nationally (Source: National Institute of Justice). The data confirms that participants achieve personal success when they are supported. It's simply a myth that too much support somehow makes people trying to get on their feet worse off. It seems rather cruel to me to impose an expectation of someone and then make it as difficult as possible for them to meet it – which is what the current laws do. Why wouldn't we want to reduce the barriers to employment as much as we possibly can? I believe the benefit far outweighs any public safety concerns, which I think the drafters did a wonderful job carefully and adequately addressing. Thus, I see no disadvantages to the adoption of the proposed changes to H.F. No. 4571.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, *“The greatness of a nation can be judged by how it treats its weakest member.”* Serving as CEO since 2010, I have seen firsthand the negative impact that suspended driving privileges has on an individual trying to turn their life around. When the laws that govern citizens are so unrelenting that the weakest member is unable to overcome, we must determine that greatness demands better of us – *more mercy, more peace.*

Faithfully,

Otis Zanders