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Oklahoma Policy Institute

2018 POLICY PRIORITY: REFORM EXCESSIVE FINES AND FEES THAT TRAP PEOPLE IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Background

Tens of thousands of Oklahomans enter the justice system each year, and many come out with thousands of dollars in debt to the courts. For low-income Oklahomans, paying this debt can be nearly impossible as they attempt to rebuild their lives, and it often leads to a cycle of poverty and repeated incarceration.

The costs charged to criminal defendants have skyrocketed in recent years as the Legislature has added or increased fees that fund various state agencies. In many cases, costs have more than doubled. While the revenue from both criminal and civil fines and fees contributes to many agencies' budgets, only a tiny fraction of criminal court debt is actually collected. This system does not improve public safety, but it does incur high costs to law enforcement, jails, and the courts.



The Solution

Oklahoma must ensure that court debt does not stand in the way of rehabilitation and reentering the workforce. The Legislature should pass a law to create specific, standardized procedures for setting up affordable payment plans instead of leaving these decisions to judges' discretion. Because such a small percentage of criminal court debt is collected, reducing financial burdens on poor defendants would likely have little, if any, effect on fee revenue for the state.

Further, no one should go to jail or have their license suspended in Oklahoma because they can't pay their fines and fees. Lawmakers should pass legislation to limit incarceration to those who do not pay and to provide alternatives for those who are financially unable.

What You Can Do

Contact your state Representative and Senator and urge them to pass reforms to court fines and fees procedures. Urge them to remove barriers to reentry and end debtors' prisons in Oklahoma. You can look up your Senator and Representative at <http://okpolicy.org/find-your-legislator/>, call the House switchboard at 405-521-2711, and call the Senate switchboard at 405-524-0126.

To join the coalition of Oklahomans working to ensure that our criminal justice system is smarter, makes our communities safer, and gives us the return on our taxpayer dollars that we deserve, visit www.okjusticereform.org. To receive SMS advocacy alerts on important criminal justice issues, text OKJUSTICE to 51555.