

Reform cash bail and court fines and fees

BACKGROUND

Since 2000, the Legislature has added dozens of new fines and fees for criminal defendants to finance our underfunded justice system. As a result, the financial costs imposed on Oklahomans involved with the court system have skyrocketed.



Thousands of people now sit in our jails, sometimes for months before trial, simply because they're unable to find the money to buy their freedom from a bail bond agent. This situation creates a perverse incentive for many defendants to plead guilty, regardless of their innocence or guilt, just to reunite with their family and avoid the conditions of our local jails.

As of 2017, about 80 percent of all defendants were indigent and eligible for a public defender. This means that the vast majority of fines and fees levied by our courts can never be paid. A person being locked up because they can't pay this debt doesn't improve public safety, and these iniquities only worsen Oklahoma's expensive incarceration crisis.

THE SOLUTION

Lawmakers should pass legislation to limit pre-trial detention to those who represent a serious flight risk or who pose a threat to public safety. Our system would be made more efficient and more fair if legislators provided practical alternatives for those who are financially unable to pay cash bail.

Oklahoma legislators should also properly fund our court system through general revenue appropriations and end the practice of incarcerating people simply because they can't pay court fees. If court debt were more properly assessed, Oklahoma could lower the financial burden for defendants while increasing the likelihood of payment. This would also cut down on the expense of housing jail and prison inmates who pose no risk to public safety.

Reforming court fines and fees and creating non-cash bail options for pre-trial release would also help those involved with the justice system maintain employment and more easily stay connected to their children and their communities.

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.

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 budget issues, text OKJUSTICE to 51555.

You can look up your Senator and Representative on our website under the **"Advocacy"** tab on our main menu. You can also call the House switchboard at 405-521-2711, and the Senate switchboard at 405-524-0126.



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