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Oklahoma Policy Institute

2017 POLICY PRIORITY: REFORM EXCESSIVE FINES AND FEES**Background**

Tens of thousands of Oklahomans enter the justice system each year and come out with thousands of dollars in debt to the court. 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. This system does nothing to improve public safety, but incurs high costs to law enforcement, jails, and the courts.

The costs charged to criminal defendants have skyrocketed in recent years as Oklahoma has increased numerous fees. Because most defendants can't afford the skyrocketing charges, only a tiny fraction of criminal court debt is collected – by one judge's estimate, only 5 to 11 percent.

**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 payment plans to allow those with court debt to pay a portion of their discretionary income, 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.

No one should go to jail or have their license suspended because they're too poor to pay fees. Lawmakers should pass legislation to prevent incarceration and ensure other options for those who can't afford to pay.

What You Should Do

Contact your state Representative and Senator and urge them to pass reforms to court fines and fees procedures. Urge them to 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.