



March 28, 2020

Hon. Andrew Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Andrew Cuomo,

The Fines and Fees Justice Center is writing to urge you to consider taking immediate action to proactively address the consequences of COVID-19 on individuals who owe fines, fees, and other court debt.

The escalating public health and economic crisis wrought by COVID-19 is unlike anything in modern U.S. history. The harms of this crisis fall heavily and disproportionately on the most vulnerable New Yorkers, especially people living paycheck-to-paycheck and people involved in the criminal legal system.

Nearly 2.5 million¹ New Yorkers work in service and sales fields shut down by the crisis and need immediate economic relief. Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers can't legally drive to meet their basic needs until New York stops suspending licenses for traffic debt. People who are incarcerated in New York and Department of Corrections staff have already tested positive for the virus. Many jurisdictions have terminated in-person visitation but keep charging exorbitant rates for phone calls and other vital forms of communication. The state should act to help our communities now.

This week, the City of Buffalo announced that it will postpone Traffic Court matters, suspend School Speed Zone program enforcement,² and lift some parking regulations,³ late fees, and interest. Brooklyn postponed some court proceedings and civil judgments. These are encouraging first steps by individual jurisdictions, but the entire state needs immediate reform to: 1) increase public safety and health; 2) ensure that fines and fees are not a barrier to people's basic needs throughout this emergency; and 3) promote the resiliency of our communities.

Immediate Recommendations For All New York Communities

1. Stop suspending driver's licenses for not paying traffic tickets or not appearing to contest them, and reinstate licenses suspended for those reasons.
2. Release individuals with a warning who are driving on a suspended license. Under no circumstances should these individuals be arrested, jailed, or prosecuted.
3. Stop issuing bench warrants and vacate existing warrants for unpaid fines, fees, or failure to appear for court debt.
4. End all collection of fines, fees, and court debt.
5. Stop imposing penalties for late or missed payments of fines, fees, and court debt.
6. Stop issuing parking tickets and municipal code violations.

¹ https://www.bls.gov/oes/2018/may/oes_ny.htm#21-0000

² <https://www.wkbn.com/news/local-news/city-of-buffalo-suspends-school-speed-zone-enforcement-closes-city-hall>

³ <https://www.wivb.com/health/coronavirus/all-9-a-m-to-4-p-m-parking-restrictions-in-the-city-suspended-effective-wednesday/>



Policy Recommendations For People in the Criminal Legal System

1. Waive any fees associated with health care in prisons and jails.
2. Provide free liquid soap, hand sanitizer, and other disinfecting products.
3. Provide free, easily accessible communication, including phone calls and emails.
4. Stop jailing or detaining individuals for unpaid fines and fees and release those already detained.
5. Stop extending or revoking probation and parole for unpaid fines and fees or other technical violations.

We appreciate your efforts to respond to this crisis with evidence-based policies that promote the best possible public health and economic outcomes for all New Yorkers. We urge you to do the same with fines and fees reforms that will support the physical and economic health of New York's most vulnerable communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Katie Adamides', is written over a horizontal line.

Katie Adamides
New York State Director
Fines and Fees Justice Center

CC:

Hon. Andrea Stewart-Cousins
Majority Leader, New York State Senate
188 State Street LOB - Room 907
Albany, NY 12247

Hon. Carl Heastie
Speaker, New York State Assembly
New York State Capitol Room 349
Albany, NY 12247