April 24, 2020

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo,

As we work together to address the continuing public health and economic crisis facing our State due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we write to respectfully request that you act immediately to minimize the compounding and preventable harm caused by fines, fees, and court debt for the duration of this crisis.

The communities we represent include those especially impacted by this crisis: essential workers, people of color, low-income families, and incarcerated individuals who live in cramped spaces without access to hygiene products. These individuals and communities have borne a disproportionate share of both the health and financial impacts of this crisis.1 As businesses shutter, large sectors of the economy grind to a halt, and people are ordered to stay home, unprecedented numbers of New Yorkers are newly unemployed. Meanwhile, many of these same communities are subjected to disproportionate levels of policing and a higher rate of criminal enforcement.2

Throughout the crisis, continued collection and enforcement of fines, fees, and court debt disproportionately penalize our most vulnerable communities, including essential workers who need our support now more than ever. Families are struggling to access and afford basic necessities like food, housing, and medical care—a problem exacerbated by the burden of fines,


fees, and court debt, and counterproductive collection practices like suspending a driver’s license for unpaid traffic tickets, which can eliminate a person’s only safe mode of transportation. Fines, fees, and court debt should not stand in the way of meeting critical needs, or prevent essential workers from driving to work or the grocery store out of fear they will be arrested for unpaid fines.

Many states across the country have already taken action to stop all enforcement related to nonpayment of fines, fees, and court debt while the COVID-19 crisis rages:

- Delaware ended the collection of all criminal and traffic court fees.
- Maine vacated all warrants for unpaid court debt.
- Oregon authorized lower courts to waive fines, fees, and court costs and suspended collection of delinquent traffic debt, including license suspensions.

These jurisdictions and others have recognized that this debt enforcement provides no benefit to the public safety and in fact exposes both the public and law enforcement to unnecessary and potentially dangerous close contacts. **With timely action, New York can respond even more robustly to mitigate the negative financial and health consequences to families by relieving them of fines, fees, court debt, and destructive enforcement practices associated with these costs.**

We ask you to help New York once again be a leader in its COVID-19 response and issue an executive order pursuant to Section 29-a of Article 2-B of the Executive Law to:

1. **Stop jailing or detaining people for unpaid fines and fees and release those already detained.** Work with the courts to withdraw all pending bench warrants issued for nonpayment of criminal court fines, fees, costs, and surcharges, or nonappearance in court on a date set for payment-related hearings, and prohibit law enforcement from executing any such warrants for the duration of the crisis.

2. **Stop suspending driver’s licenses for not paying or appearing to contest traffic tickets for the duration of the state of emergency** (not including suspensions for reasons related to points accrual, driving under the influence of alcohol, or other safety reasons). Reinstate driver’s licenses suspended for these reasons. In the interim, release individuals with a warning who are driving on a suspended license. Under no circumstances should these individuals be arrested, jailed, or prosecuted.

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3. **Stop collection of all criminal court fines, fees, surcharges, Transit Adjudication Bureau (TAB) fines, traffic violation fines, and parole and probation fees.**

4. **Waive for the duration of the state of emergency all late fees, interest accrual, and other consequences, including revoking or extending probation and parole sentences for nonpayment or late payment** of criminal court fines, fees, costs, and surcharges, as well as TAB fines and traffic violation fines.

5. **Stop the assessment and imposition of all criminal court fees and mandatory surcharges, and forgive all outstanding criminal court fees and surcharges.**

6. **Order local law enforcement to stop routinely citing people for parking and other minor violations in cases** where they pose little or no threat to public safety.

7. **Notify the public of the above changes so that families may plan their finances accordingly.** Notify people at least a week in advance when their upcoming court, TAB, or traffic payment dates have been rescheduled due to the pandemic.

We urge you to use your executive power to immediately cease enforcement of financial punishments that unnecessarily expose New Yorkers to COVID-19 and that deprive them of urgently-needed funds during this crisis. We also ask that you work closely with the Chief Justice and the Unified Court System to ensure this order is carried out consistently across our state.

Sincerely,

Timothy M. Kennedy
New York State Senator, 63rd District

Pamela J. Hunter
New York State Assembly, 128th District

Julia Salazar
New York State Senator, 18th District

Yuh-Line Niou
New York State Assembly, 65th District

Rachel May
New York State Senator, 53rd District

Carmen De La Rosa
New York State Assembly Member, 72nd District

Luis Sepulveda
New York State Senator, 32nd District

Karines Reyes
New York State Assembly Member, 87th District

Brad Hoylman
New York State Senator, 27th District

Walter Mosley
New York State Assembly Member, 57th District

Velmanette Montgomery
New York State Senator, 25th District

Felix Ortiz
New York State Assembly Member, 51st District
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John Liu
New York State Senator, 11th District

Michael Miller
New York State Assembly Member, 38th District

Brian Kavanagh
New York State Senator, 26th District

Maritza Davila
New York State Assembly Member, 53rd District

Simcha Felder
New York State Senator, 17th District

Inez Dickens
New York State Assembly Member, 70th District

Kevin Parker
New York State Senator, 21st District

Jeffrion Aubry
New York State Assembly Member, 35th District

James Gaughran
New York State Senator, 5th District

Jo Anne Simon
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Neil Breslin
New York State Senator, 44th District

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New York State Assembly Member, 90th District

Roxanne Persuad
New York State Senator, 19th District

Alicia Hyndman
New York State Assembly Member, 29th District

James Sanders Jr.
New York State Senator, 10th District

Catalina Cruz
New York State Assembly Member, 39th District

Michael Blake
New York State Assembly Member, 79th District

Nick Perry
New York State Assembly Member, 58th District

Charles Barron
New York State Assembly Member, 60th District

CC: The Honorable Janet DiFiore
Chief Judge of the State of New York
New York State Unified Court System
25 Beaver St., 11th Floor
New York, NY 10004

Phil Steck
New York State Assembly Member, 110th District