

LOCAL FINE AND FEE REFORM MATTERS

How Localities are Advancing Bold and Equitable Reforms through Cities and Counties for Fine and Fee Justice



Across the country, city and county leaders are advancing bold reforms to ensure their fines, fees, and other financial penalties do not place a disproportionate burden on low-income residents and people of color. These reforms advance racial and economic equity, make a difference in the lives of residents, increase economic prosperity, safely shrink the criminal legal system, and are feasible for local government actors to implement.

IMPACT

Through Cities and Counties for Fine and Fee Justice, jurisdictions across the country have worked to identify, develop, and implement policy reforms to help people in their cities and counties by:

- Eliminating criminal-legal system and municipal fees;
- Forgiving outstanding debt;
- Recalling and dismissing warrants;
- Dramatically lowering costs of phone calls and commissary items in jails, booking fees, and medical co-pays;
- Ending driver's license suspensions for nonpayment of fines and fees;
- Implementing restitution funds;
- Providing fine and fee waivers and reductions for people with low incomes, and more.

COHORT 1:

- Allegheny County, Pennsylvania
- Chicago, Illinois
- Dallas, Texas
- Durham, North Carolina
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Providence, Rhode Island
- Sacramento City and County, California
- Seattle/King County, Washington
- Shelby County, Tennessee
- St. Paul, Minnesota

COHORT 2:

- Chatham County, Georgia
- Jefferson County, Alabama
- Miami-Dade County, Florida
- Washtenaw County, Michigan
- City of Wilmington, Delaware
- Wyandotte County/City of Kansas City, Kansas

BOLD REFORMS

In the second cohort of Cities and Counties for Fine and Fee Justice, five jurisdictions advanced bold reforms locally across three policy areas. Below is a selection of highlights and impacts from the second cohort of jurisdictions. (Click [here](#) to learn more about the first cohort)

1 End high-pain administrative fees charged to people in the criminal legal system. People in the criminal legal system, who are disproportionately people of color, are often charged thousands of dollars in administrative fees and surcharges that aim to cover costs or raise revenue. These fees are a counterproductive, harmful, anemic source of revenue. These fees, such as probation fees, attorney fees, and electronic ankle monitor fees, are often charged to very low-income people who cannot afford to pay them and entrench people in the criminal legal system with no way out.

- **WASHTENAW COUNTY, MI** implemented a judicial administrative policy to eliminate a \$60 fingerprint fee, \$1,611 in court costs, and a \$650 attorney fee for individuals who qualify for assigned counsel - fees that amount to roughly 12% of the total annual income for the average poorest resident in the county. Over 400 individuals have had these court costs waived in the first 10 months of the policy.

2 Eliminate the high costs of incarceration charged to incarcerated people and their families. The costs of incarceration, such as phone call costs, upcharges on commissary items and tablets, and fees, are a significant economic drain on low-income communities and oftentimes these costs of incarceration fall on women of color.

- **MIAMI-DADE COUNTY, FL** eliminated a \$2 daily subsistence fee and provided \$72 million in debt relief tied to this fee. Miami-Dade has also committed to making jail phone calls free. The Miami-Dade County team continues to push for reform through an ordinance that

- **WYANDOTTE COUNTY, KS** [eliminated](#) several court costs and fees and codified an ability-to-pay docket. The team led a successful effort to pass an [ordinance](#) to eliminate a \$30 municipal court fee, public defender fee, booking fee, and trial docketing fee and formalized a monthly ability to pay docket. The team continues to work to reduce the financial burden associated with court-ordered educational classes by providing these classes in-house at no cost to roughly 400 people per year, an estimated annual savings to the community of \$120,000.
- **JEFFERSON COUNTY, AL** has dismissed stale cases and recalled thousands of outstanding warrants going as far back as the 1980s, immediately ensuring these individuals will no longer risk arrest, fines, or fees. In addition, to right-size financial assessments, a local court initiated a pilot project to reduce fine and fee assessments that typically range between \$489 and \$1,132 to \$100.

will be introduced in early 2024 to eliminate all costs imposed on incarcerated individuals, including processing fees, fees for medical and dental care, electronic monitoring fees, and bootcamp fees.

- **WASHTENAW COUNTY, MI** is working towards eliminating a \$12 booking fee assessed to individuals booked into the local county jail, which if goes unpaid, could result in an additional \$100 fine. Other fees under review include those for electronic monitoring, drug testing, and pre-trial monitoring, which would impact around 3,000 individuals per year.

3 Eliminate fines that do not advance a key policy goal and create alternatives to fines where the goal can be achieved through other means. Fines should be proportionate to the offense, the person, and their circumstances. They should be enforced equitably and serve a public policy goal. Fines should not exceed the ability of people with low incomes to pay and when imposed, should be right-sized to fit the individual and the circumstances.

- **WILMINGTON, DE** launched its efforts over the last year by passing an ordinance to create a [Fines and Fees Task Force](#) to review all the fines and fees administered by the City of Wilmington and evaluate them for fairness and equity. Their immediate goal is to reduce parking ticket fines from \$40 to \$25 while ensuring meaningful due process protections are available through a revived parking ticket appeals process.

To learn more about these policy areas, check out our [policy guides here](#). These guides provide local leaders with a step-by-step process to assess the fiscal and human impact of fines and fees, engage key government and community stakeholders, and design and implement strategies to enact meaningful reforms.

CITIES AND COUNTIES FOR FINE AND FEE JUSTICE

Three organizations, [Fines and Fees Justice Center](#), the [San Francisco Financial Justice Project](#), and [Results for America](#), joined together to support jurisdictions to advance local fine and fee reform through Cities and Counties for Fine and Fee Justice: a national leadership network of judges, prosecutors, local government, and community leaders committed to meaningful fine

and fee reform that works better for people and government. Since its launch in 2019, Cities and Counties for Fine and Fee Justice has worked on the ground with 16 jurisdictions and has provided education and thought partnership in the development of fine and fee reform in over 50 jurisdictions across the country.



“The cohort offers us the unique opportunity to deepen the impact of efforts. Reducing the impact of fines and fees is aligned with the County’s overall equity strategy. It’s a transformational change of a system that has negatively and disproportionately impacted poor people, Black people and People of Color.”

— ALIZE ASBERRY-PAYNE, RACIAL EQUITY OFFICER, WASHTENAW COUNTY, MI

JOIN US

Local problems need local solutions. Learn more about Cities and Counties for Fine and Fee Justice [here](#). To be the first to hear about upcoming events and opportunities, email ccffj@ffjc.us.

