



NEWS RELEASE
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**The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Announces its Briefing:
Targeted Fines and Fees against Low-Income People of Color:
Civil Rights and Constitutional Implications**

Washington, DC – The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights will hold a public briefing to examine the Department of Justice’s (DOJ’s) enforcement efforts in the area of municipal courts and fees, Friday, March 17, from 9:30 am to 3:00 pm EST. The briefing will take place in the Commission’s offices at the National Place Building, 1331 Pennsylvania Av. NW, Suite 1150, Washington, DC 20425. (Entrance via F St. NW)

In 2015, the DOJ released findings from its investigation into the practices of the City of Ferguson’s municipal courts. The DOJ identified financial conflicts-of-interest and adverse impacts to community policing that came from jailing community members for non-payment of fines and fees. Municipalities that rely on raising revenue through the court system may interfere with the judiciary’s independent role, divert attention from the courts’ essential functions, and adversely impact the most vulnerable residents, principally those living in or near poverty. The Commission hosted a [briefing](#) on March 18, 2016, to examine the extent to which these practices occur nationwide, and to explore reforms.

For our statutory enforcement report this year, the Commission is building upon last year’s briefing and focusing on the DOJ’s enforcement efforts regarding municipal court reforms and fines and fees. To inform the Commission’s review of these enforcement efforts and the preparation of a report on the civil rights issues related to these fees, our March 17 briefing will hear from three panels, comprised of judicial officials, civil society organizations, academics, and individual stakeholders.

Panelists will focus on three areas of enforcement: 1) the “Dear Colleague” letter, which was sent by the DOJ to State Administrators and Chief Justices; 2) “The Price of Justice: Rethinking the Consequences of Justice Fines and Fees,” a DOJ grant program that supports reforms to address individuals’ inability to pay fees and fines, along with the elimination of unnecessary confinement; and 3) the DOJ’s patterns and practices investigations. In addition, the panelists will discuss data collection and surveys published since the Commission’s 2016 briefing to address the scope of problems surrounding municipal fines and fees, and to make recommendations for reform.

Please see the meeting agenda below. The briefing is open to the public, and individuals can also call-in (listen only) to hear the sessions: Phone 1-877-545-1402; ID # 874-9423.

Chair Catherine E. Lhamon stated: “Municipal practices of raising money through persons in contact with the justice system raise serious civil rights concerns regarding unequal access to justice and conflict of interest for those charged with assuring justice. In addition, as the recent past in Ferguson, Missouri painfully highlighted, the practices can have racially discriminatory impacts. The Commission is committed to assessing the efficacy of federal efforts to ensure fair and nondiscriminatory practices.”

Vice Chair Patricia Timmons-Goodson stated: “The administration of justice in this country rests on municipal courts performing the judicial function for which they were designed.”

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The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is an independent, bipartisan agency charged with advising the President and Congress on civil rights matters and issuing an annual federal civil rights enforcement report. For information about the Commission, please visit <http://www.usccr.gov> and follow us on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/usccrgov>

AGENDA

Public Briefing on Targeted Fines and Fees against Low-Income People of Color: Civil Rights and Constitutional Implications

March 17, 2017

Opening Remarks: 9:30 am

A. Panel One: Department of Justice’s (DOJ) “Dear Colleague” Letter and Other Voluntary Court Reform Efforts (9:40 am – 10:55 am)

Court Administrators reflect on the impact of the “Dear Colleague” letter on municipal court reform, the availability of federal grant monies for reform, and discuss other voluntary court reforms taking place across U.S. states.

- David Slayton, Texas Court of Court Administration
- Martha Wright, Judicial Council of California
- Cynthia Delostrinos, Washington State Supreme Court’s Minority and Justice Commission
- Sherri Paschal, Missouri Office of State Courts Administrator

B. Panel Two: Ferguson and Beyond: Patterns and Practices (11:00 am – 12:15 pm)

Community advocates, the Missouri court system, and an individual involved in investigating the City of Ferguson’s municipal court practices discuss: 1) the implementation of the initial reforms, 2) what is working and not working, 3) how those reforms have affected the lived experience of citizens, and 4) whether other reforms are needed.

- Chiraag Bains, Criminal Justice Policy Program at Harvard Law School
- Judge Karl DeMarce, Circuit Court of Scotland County, MO, and Sherri Paschal, Missouri Office of State Courts Administrator
- Thomas Harvey, Arch City Defenders

Lunch Break 12:15 pm - 1:15 pm

C. Panel Three: Fines and Fees’ Date and Research, and Recommendations (1:15 pm - 3:00 pm)

Professors and criminal justice experts discuss the data regarding how the practice of generating revenue through the municipal court system has impacted low-income communities of color and provide policy recommendations for reforming municipal court systems.

- Sarah Shannon, Ph.D., University of Georgia
- Derek Cohen, Texas Public Policy Foundation; Right on Crime
- Mitali Nagrecha, Criminal Justice Policy Program at Harvard Law School
- Grover Norquist, Americans for Tax Reform
- Marc Levin, Texas Public Policy Foundation; Right on Crime
- Neil Sobol, Texas A&M University

Adjourn Briefing – 3:00 pm