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San Diego latest California county to eliminate old juvenile fees, freeing thousands of families from oppressive debt

18 counties continue to seek payment from vulnerable families during COVID-19 – Orange and Tulare remain top holdouts still collecting almost $50 million

San Diego -- Today the San Diego County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to discharge more than $40 million in old juvenile fees for roughly 9,100 families – many of whom live at or below the poverty line. The Board's decision follows closely on the heels of neighboring Riverside County's decision to discharge $4.1 million in juvenile fee debt last month and Stanislaus County's decision to discharge $6.9 million in juvenile fees earlier this month.

"Today our board took a long overdue step to alleviate an unjust burden on youth and families by eliminated the outdated practice of collecting overdue juvenile fees," said **San Diego County Supervisor Nathan Fletcher**. "I campaigned on this issue and upon election last year starting working to bring our county out of the dark ages and into a brighter future."

Senate Bill 190, which went into effect on January 1, 2018, prohibited counties from charging families new juvenile fees, but it did not require counties to end collection of previously assessed fees – much of which is decades old. Most counties agreed with the intent behind SB 190 – to provide relief for vulnerable families and communities – and have voluntarily discharged old fees.

"With San Diego's action today, 40 of California's 58 counties have stopped collecting more than $300 million in past fees, because they've learned from research that these fees a regressive and racially discriminatory tax on vulnerable families that undermine key goals of the justice system," said **Jeffrey Selbin, Clinical Professor of Law at UC Berkeley Law School**. "Families barely making ends meet even before the current economic crisis suffer the most from these fees, which do nothing to help their kids."

A San Diego family featured in a February story in CalMatters has been billed and harassed for years for fees charged when their son was detained in juvenile hall. The County intercepted their tax return and put a lien on their house, all for the mistakes of a child – one of six – that the family adopted from the

County: “You’re almost penalized for doing…the right thing” by adopting, the father said. “It’s kind of like we’ve done everything we can possibly do for these kids and it just comes at a huge price.”

San Diego acknowledged this kind of harm in today’s resolution ending juvenile fees:

> *These fees impact the County of San Diego’s rehabilitative goals for youth and families, many of whom already live below the poverty line. The debt follows families well after the child’s offense and term of probation is completed, affecting their ability to invest in basic needs such as education and healthcare, or financially preparing their child for life as an adult. The long-term consequences of these outstanding debts further exacerbate conditions of poverty for not only the affected families but for their surrounding community and can lead to further unintended costs to society.*

San Diego’s action will become final on June 2, 2020, but is retroactive to February 14, 2020—the date the County declared a COVID-19 State of Emergency “to provide urgent and direct financial relief to these families who are already facing unprecedented financial hardships due to the unintended consequences of the COVID-19 global pandemic.”

In spite of the momentum of dozens of California counties providing relief for families – particularly in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, holdout counties remain. Of the 18 counties that have not discharged old fees, Orange County is still collecting $38 million and Tulare is collecting $11 million. Advocates maintain an interactive map of the counties still charging fees.

"We are ecstatic to see that after years of young people and families organizing across the state, San Diego has become the next county to end the unjust practice of collecting juvenile system fee debt,” said **Anthony Robles of Youth Justice Coalition**, a lead organizer on the issue in California. “With all the growing momentum across the state, it is time for us to end these fees once-and-for all in California by passing SB 1290, a bill we are co-sponsoring which will be heard in the Senate Public Safety Committee tomorrow."

California Senate Bill 1290 seeks to eliminate juvenile fee debt altogether. In the meantime, as SB 1290 goes through the legislative process, and as COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc on public health and the economy, families in these holdout counties continue to be burdened by unnecessary fees.

“If passed, SB 1290 will provide substantial relief for families living in counties that have not followed the majority of counties in the state in acknowledging that these fees are bad policy with little fiscal benefit. Given the current economic crisis, families need all of their income to pay for basic needs,” said **Rebecca Miller, senior litigator at Western Center on Law & Poverty**, a co-sponsor of both SB 1290 and SB 190. “We hope that the hold out counties reconsider their duty to their residents and act now to discharge all remaining debt.”

Last month, more than 130 groups across the country and political spectrum called for a moratorium on all juvenile fees and fines during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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