



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 21, 2020

CONTACTS:

Jhumpa Bhattacharya
Vice President of Programs and Strategy
Insight Center for Community
Economic Development
510-466-1711
jhumpa@insightccd.org

Stephanie Campos-Bui
Clinical Supervising Attorney
UC Berkeley School of Law
Policy Advocacy Clinic
760-349-6631
scamposbui@law.berkeley.edu

GOVERNOR SIGNS HISTORIC BILL REPEALING UNJUST CRIMINAL FEES IN CALIFORNIA PROVIDING MUCH NEEDED RELIEF TO CALIFORNIANS

SACRAMENTO, CA—Last Friday, Governor Gavin Newsom signed AB 1869, making California the first state in the country to repeal administrative fees in the criminal system. This historic reform will reduce the harm caused by court-imposed debt and strengthen the economic security of low-income communities of color.

AB 1869 permanently ends the assessment and collection of 23 administrative fees in the criminal system effective July 1, 2021. The bill also writes off all outstanding fee debt. The Policy Advocacy Clinic at Berkeley Law estimates that AB 1869 will relieve Californians of **over \$16 billion in outstanding criminal fee debt**, the vast majority of which is uncollectible because people cannot afford to pay.

According to Senate Budget Chair Senator Holly J. Mitchell (D-Los Angeles): “For too long, the imposition of fees by our courts has taken away much-needed resources from people and perpetuated historic forms of racialized wealth extraction. By eliminating these criminal administrative fees, we can put money back in the pockets of Black and Latinx people and invest in the public health and safety of all communities.”

Currently, California law permits counties to charge people administrative fees related to their legal representation, probation, and incarceration. These fees often add up to thousands of dollars for a single person and pose significant barriers to reentry. Unpaid fees can be enforced via wage garnishment, bank levy, and tax refund intercept.

“As a public defender, it is painful to watch clients be saddled with fees, knowing that they won’t be able to pay,” said San Francisco Public Defender Mano Raju, whose office is part of Debt Free Justice California. “The criminal legal system disrupts people’s lives and families in so many ways that adding financial penalties sets people up for failure when we should be setting them up for future success. By eliminating fees, we’re paving the way to more resilient communities.”

Angelique Evans, an organizer with A New Way of Life, shared her experience: “Almost immediately after being released from prison, Los Angeles County told me that I owed over \$3,000 in administrative fees. As a mother, I wanted to prioritize taking care of my son and getting back on my feet. The fees held me back, both emotionally and financially. This bill will allow people returning home to focus on what matters most—rebuilding our families and lives.”

AB 1869 builds on years of organizing and advocacy by [Debt Free Justice California](#). Research by the coalition shows that imposing fees on people in the criminal system is high pain because it leaves many with insurmountable debt, and low gain because counties net little, if any, revenue from these fees. Due to over-policing and racial bias in the system, the burden of fees falls disproportionately on Black and Latinx communities.

Out of concern for racial and economic justice, legality, and costs, four counties—San Francisco, Alameda, Contra Costa, and Los Angeles—stopped charging some discretionary fees over the last few years. AB 1869 brings debt-free justice to all Californians across the state.

Jhumpa Bhattacharya, Vice President of the Insight Center for Community and Economic Development and member of Debt Free Justice California, said: “We joined together as a coalition to think bigger, broader, and more critically about how anti-Blackness, xenophobia and sexism underpin the rules of our economy, the criminal system and policing. The imposition of criminal fees was not simply a matter of good or bad fiscal policy, but a reflection of multiple systems of entrenched racism that have led to targeted policing and over-incarceration of Black and Brown communities, consequently widening racial and gender wealth inequality.”

The passage of AB 1869 will help California begin the process of reinvesting in communities and disinvesting from our carceral system.

#END#

Debt Free Justice California is a multi-regional, California-based coalition focused on putting a stop to the unfair ways the criminal system drains wealth from vulnerable communities. The coalition is comprised of legal advocates, policy experts, and most importantly, movement-building organizations led by impacted people. For more information, visit: <https://ebclc.org/cadebtjustice/about/>.