

# JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

*Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes*

## **TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 0036:**

### **Juvenile Proceedings - Fines, Fees, and Costs**

**TO:** Hon. Luke Clippinger, Chair, and Members of the Judiciary Committee  
**FROM:** Derrell Frazier, Policy Advocate  
**DATE:** January 16, 2020

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates for policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. JOTF supports House Bill 0036 as a means to ensure that working families are not pushed further into debt, simply due to an interaction with the criminal justice system.

For the 10 percent of Marylanders living below the federal poverty line, the management and repayment of even small debts can be a major challenge. This challenge is further exacerbated for those with a criminal record, a significant barrier to employment. However, despite these known obstacles, the re-entering community are levied with fees and other criminal justice system debt upon release. This is debt that they simply cannot repay and presents yet another obstacle for them to hurdle. This same cycle of debt applies to youth and their parents, however, often times, families are forced to choose between the freedom of their children over maintaining their other household's responsibilities.

JOTF's recently released report entitled, "The Criminalization of Poverty," studies how criminal justice debt burdens the poor and recently released. Studies show that 80 to 85 percent of those who are released have debt due to fees incurred while incarcerated. This estimates to approximately 10 million individuals who owe more than \$50 billion in debt that is likely to never be repaid due to financial circumstance. This debt further impoverishes already indigent families and youth, who may lack access to educational and employment opportunities.

The assessment of these fees creates an unbreakable cycle that cannot be fixed by waivers or payment plans. An inability to pay is simply that and while payment plans may assist in some regard, it is not a solution. Even further, our state's youth, especially those of color, continue to be the most vulnerable and in need to support in order to lift themselves out of the cycle of poverty. Studies show that youth who experience prolonged periods of disconnection from work and/or school have far more difficulty building an economic foundation for future independence, and this is certainly true for youth who have interactions with the criminal justice system. In 2016, JOTF released a report in collaboration with a local nonprofit, Baltimore's Promise, that explored the disconnection between youth and employment opportunities. Our research focused on the approximately 18,000 "Opportunity Youth" in Baltimore City, ages 16 to 24, who are neither working nor enrolled in school, many of whom had interacted with the criminal justice system in some capacity.

Our state's youth remain an untapped opportunity for Baltimore employers looking for skilled workers and connecting youth to middle-skilled careers with a family-supporting wage, which can be the difference between a home and the streets for Maryland youth. However, the debt that many of them face acts as both a cause and consequence to their interactions with the criminal justice system, while also

adding to the significant barriers to success that many of them consistently face. As such, building viable pathways for this population to be supported and succeed is imperative.

House Bill 0036 seeks to address this issue by repealing statutory provisions that authorize the juvenile court to (1) impose civil penalties or court costs; (2) assess attorney's fees; and (3) order a parent to pay a sum to support the child. The bill prohibits a court in a juvenile proceeding from ordering a parent, guardian, or custodian to pay a sum of money to cover the support of a child or a fine, fee, or cost.

JOTF strongly supports any legislation, and all legislation like that, that encourages a restructuring of the punitive criminal justice system that disproportionately impacts and punishes the low-wage job seekers of Maryland. We believe that what is proposed in HB 0036 is a significant step towards ensuring that those who are released have a fighting chance. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report of this bill.