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Research and Transparency on Reducing Use of Fines and Fees Can Lead to Equitable Reforms

Position Statement Supporting House Bill 154

Given before the House Judiciary Committee

Maryland residents from impoverished communities often disproportionately encounter the criminal justice system. These involvements put undue burdens on low-income communities of color through the use of court-mandated fines and fees. These fees impoverish communities of color with debt that compounds over time. Yet, currently, there is no collection of data that explicitly spells out how fines and fees are used across agencies and how much Marylanders owe in criminal justice debt. **The Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports House Bill 154 because by establishing a workgroup to provide transparency to criminal justice related debt and studying its impact on Marylanders, policymakers can be best equipped to enact equitable reforms.**

- The “fees for service” include court-related fees (administrative, jury, and restitution), home detention, parole and probation, public defender representation (application and reimbursement), jail room and board (especially for pretrial), mandatory drug and alcohol testing, vehicle interlock devices, criminal record expungement, as well as interest and late fees from the Central Collections Unit (CCU).
- In 2018, Alexis Harris, a sociologist at the University of Washington, estimated that 80-85% of incarcerated persons now leaving prison owe criminal justice costs. This is estimated to amount to some 10 million Americans who owe more than \$50 billion in criminal justice debt. These fines and fees serve to further impoverish already indigent individuals, leaving them in a spiral of debt.

Given that Maryland’s criminal justice system disproportionately (and at many times unnecessarily) burdens lower-income communities of color, House Bill 0154 is a step towards understanding how damaging the majority of financial debts arising from court-related fines and fees are.

For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully requests the Judiciary Committee to make a favorable report on House Bill 154.

Equity Impact Analysis: House Bill 154

Bill summary

House Bill 154 establishes a workgroup involving several stakeholders to study impact of court-mandated fines and fees on low-income residents and the revenue structure that relies on court-mandated fines and fees. The workgroup will develop a report providing recommendations for eliminating or reducing court-mandated fines and fees, and a comprehensive database and schedule of court-mandated fines and fees.

Background

Data on court-related fines and fees can be limited. The compounding costs of these court related fees and debt disproportionately impacts communities of color and continue to be relied on as revenue. Establishing a workgroup to study these effects and make recommendations based on data will lead to equity and transparency.

Equity Implications

Fine and fees disproportionately impact Marylanders from low-income communities, especially communities of color. These fines are extensive and often keep families impoverished through a continuing a cycle of involvement with the criminal justice system.

Impact

House Bill 0154 would like to **improve racial, economic, and gender equity** in the state by providing the data and recommendations to reduce court reliance on fines and fees.