



Debt Free
Justice
California

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PRESS CONTACT

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Governor and Legislature Agree on a Budget Eliminating All Civil Assessment Debt—But Keeping Fees at \$100

Sacramento, CA — Governor Gavin Newsom and the Legislature have agreed on a budget that eliminates all debt from civil assessments, but does not fully eliminate the fees themselves, keeping civil assessment fees at a maximum of \$100 instead of the previous \$300 maximum.

This relief for millions of Californians, which will start on July 1, is an important victory, eliminating more than \$500 million in back debt for late traffic fees that unduly burdens poor Californians.

The civil assessment is a late fee used to fund the courts on the backs of people with traffic tickets. It has its roots in the racist tough-on-crime policies of the 1980s and 1990s, when it was created to address judicial funding shortages caused by the costs of mass incarceration. It is a needless, regressive and racist tax on low-income Californians that extracts [\\$100 million annually](#), primarily from low-income and Black and brown Californians.

Eliminating civil assessment debt was not part of the [original budget proposal](#) and was secured as a result of statewide organizing that involved hundreds of Californians speaking out, sharing their stories, contacting their representatives, and calling attention to the racist and regressive nature of the civil assessment. We celebrate the elimination of all civil assessment debt and urge similar amnesty actions for all court-imposed fees.

Unfortunately, the administration did not fully undo the harms caused by civil assessments, opting for a partial remedy that will leave open the door for indebtedness and impoverishment for thousands more Californians. The civil assessment, now capped at \$100, will continue to impose an unnecessary and often untenable burden on low-income people already reeling from inflation and the ongoing effects of a multi-year pandemic.

“Governor Newsom had the opportunity to eliminate this racist and regressive fee and didn’t step up,” said **Rio Scharf, the Equal Justice Works Fellow at the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area (LCCRSF)**, a member organization of DFJC. “Despite the Legislature’s proposal to end civil assessments and the overwhelming evidence that they harm poor Black and brown residents, the Governor chose not to eliminate this hidden late fee. The continuation of civil assessments will burden many more Californians and undermine the very financial relief the Governor seeks to deliver through this year’s budget.”

As a coalition, Debt Free Justice California is committed to ending the unjust, racist practices the criminal legal system uses to extract money and wealth from California’s most marginalized communities. Our priority has been to pass legislation to abolish all fees sanctioned by the state’s

legal system, ending the deleterious practice of balancing budgets on the backs of poor Black and brown communities. As part of that work, the coalition has won important victories over the past three years, eliminating over 40 different fees and releasing now over \$17 billion of debt, through passage of the following legislation:

- Assembly Bill 1869 (2020), which eliminated 23 fees and discharged \$15.9 billion in debt
- Assembly Bill 177 (2021), which eliminated 17 fees and discharged \$534 million in debt
- Assembly Bill/Senate Bill 199 (2022), which discharges more than \$500 million in debt

We will continue to fight until civil assessments are no longer. They do not aid in compelling people to pay or appear in court; they just burden low-income people, particularly Black and brown communities who are subject to targeted policing and surveillance. Our courts remain overreliant on punitive tools for coercing defendants, rather than proactive and supportive approaches that help address the underlying causes of failure to pay or appear. These fees serve no legitimate purpose.

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