



[Debt Free Justice California](#) came together as a coalition in 2018 to end 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 the over 90 administrative fees within the state's legal system, ending the deleterious policy practice of balancing budgets on the backs of poor Black and brown communities.

We began our journey by introducing the Families Over Fees Act in 2019, which proposed the repeal of all criminal legal system fees and all debt associated with them. In 2020, the passage of the Families Over Fees Act (Assembly Bill 1869) eliminated 23 fees and expunged over **\$16 billion** in debt for primarily Black and brown Californians, effective July 1, 2021. This year, we sought legislation to eliminate the remaining fees and are proud to have negotiated Senate Bill 177, which eliminates 17 additional fees and discharges over an estimated \$534 million in debt.

Our coalition remains grounded in the philosophy to lead with the perspectives and experiences of directly impacted people. As such, our north star remains to provide our communities what they asked for and deserve, specifically the elimination of all fees within the legal system and the cessation of the collection of all previously assessed fees. This goal includes eliminating civil assessments, identified by impacted people as one of the most pernicious fees left on the books. Unfortunately, despite having Legislative support, the Administration of Governor Gavin Newsom did not agree to eliminate this fee or the associated debt in the August budget agreement. This issue has been left for a January budget action under consideration.

We will continue the fight to abolish civil assessments, a nearly \$300 fee charged to people who miss an appearance in court or can't afford a fine. Civil assessments do not aid in compelling people to pay or appear in court; rather, these fees only further burden low-income people and lead to additional collateral consequences. Civil assessment revenue has been steadily declining for the last decade, and the State has had to step in to supplant the growing revenue shortfall consistently. While the Judicial Council has provided no data on how much remains outstanding, we know the debt is not only substantial but uncollectible as the vast majority of people will never be able to pay.

Because of targeted policing and the over surveillance of Black and brown communities, these communities are overwhelmingly burdened with civil assessment fees. We must stop our reliance on fees and fines to fill government coffers. Doing so is unfair, unjust, counter-productive, and racist. For the good of all Californians, we plan to keep up the fight to eliminate civil assessments and the remaining administrative fees.

Relatedly, the ability to issue bench warrants after someone fails to appear or pay a court fee is disastrous to our communities; it increases incarceration and arrest rates and furthers harm.

For these reasons, we will continue our effort to repeal the authority to issue bench warrants on infractions.

We are proud of what we have accomplished in these last two years in eliminating 40 fees and releasing **\$16.4 billion of debt**, making California a trailblazing state in the fight towards fines and fees reform. With the passage of SB 176 this year, we were also able to curtail the Franchise Tax Board's use of predatory collection practices for those saddled with criminal legal debt by removing their power to bank levy if an account balance is below a [minimum](#) or garnish wages if a person is paid below a full-time minimum wage salary. Wage garnishment and bank levy are deeply harmful practices that deprive people of the ability to make a living and provide for their families. SB 176 is an important step towards ending California's use of these practices to collect fines and fees for state and local governments.

All of these wins mean a lot to Black and brown Californians, and we look forward to the Governor signing this bill and working with the Legislature and Administration in continuing the pursuit of debt-free justice in California.