

# CITIES & COUNTIES FOR **Fine and Fee Justice**

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

*Thank you for your interest in Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice. Below are answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) that:*

- *Provide an overview of the network;*
- *Describe the activities participating cities and counties will undertake;*
- *Provide background on fine and fee reforms advanced in San Francisco and across the country;*
- *Discuss the type of assistance participating cities and counties will receive;*
- *Identify eligibility requirements for participating in the network; and*
- *Discuss important information about the application process.*

*Please carefully review these questions and answers prior to starting your application. If you have any questions regarding Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice, the application, or application process, please contact Kasandra Kachakji, at [Kasandra@policylink.org](mailto:Kasandra@policylink.org).*

### **1) What is Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice?**

PolicyLink, The San Francisco Financial Justice Project, and the Fines and Fees Justice Center are launching Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice to support localities that want to assess and reform fines, fees, tickets, and financial penalties that often have an adverse and disproportionate impact on low-income people and people of color. We are looking for innovators in city and county government who want to take a leadership role in advancing fair and just policies that promote equity and smart government.

The network will help cities and counties develop and implement reforms that make a difference in the lives of low-income residents and that are feasible for government to implement. Our long-term goal is to create a cohort of cities and counties that act as national leaders, create innovative models of effective reforms, and inspire localities across the country to do the same.

PolicyLink, The San Francisco Financial Justice Project, the Fines and Fees Justice Center, and other experts will provide support — including technical assistance, research, best practices, budgeting/revenue forecasting, messaging, and press outreach — to help localities examine and reform fines and fees imposed in their communities. Participating localities will also receive grant support of \$50,000.

Network members may be city and/or county governments. To apply, each locality must create a team of individuals that have the necessary capacities and authority to advance meaningful reforms. Each team will include an elected official and a senior government staff member who will serve as the coordinator and point person for the local team. In addition, each applicant must state how they plan to engage community groups and people directly impacted by fines and fees in the reform process.

We envision that participating cities and counties will develop and implement at least three fine and fee reforms as part of their participation in the network, catalyzing similar reforms across the country.

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## **2) Why establish a network devoted to helping local leaders advance fine and fee reform?**

Local governments and courts have long levied fines and fees, as a sanction for unlawful conduct and to raise government revenue. Over the past several years, there has been growing awareness that fines and fees can have insidious unintended impacts — to entrench poverty and entrap people in the criminal legal system. The weight of fines and fees can be debilitating to individuals, families, and communities. People with lower incomes and people of color are often hit the hardest. These financial penalties can make government a driver of inequality, not an equalizer of opportunity.

Across the country, city and county leaders are advancing bold reforms to ensure their fines, fees, and tickets do not place a disproportionate burden on low-income residents and people of color. These leaders have realized that fines and fees often exceed people's ability to pay them — a lose-lose, for people and for government. These leaders are implementing reforms that advance racial equity, make a difference in the lives of residents, and are feasible for government to implement.

The local officials driving these reforms are united by several core beliefs: (1) it is possible to hold people accountable without putting them in financial distress; (2) people with lower incomes should not face more severe consequences than middle- and upper-income residents; and (3) governments should not balance their books on the backs of the least fortunate individuals in their communities.

## **3) What will participating cities and counties commit to do?**

Participating cities and counties will:

- Engage community organizations and people directly impacted by fines and fees to build an understanding of the community's most pressing fine and fee concerns and to help identify and implement solutions;
- Conduct an internal assessment to identify fines, fees, tickets, and financial penalties that have an adverse impact on low-income people and people of color;
- Develop a policy agenda informed by the assessment and continued engagement with community members;
- Enact, or develop an actionable plan to enact, at least three meaningful fine and fee reforms;
- Demonstrate national leadership by sharing their knowledge and lessons learned with other jurisdictions.

Cities and counties will take these actions over an 18-month period. While timing may vary by jurisdiction, a sample timeline may be: Team creation and formalization (month 1), community listening sessions (months 2-3, and ongoing); data gathering and assessment (months 4-5, ongoing); develop and pursue policy agenda (months 6-12); enact fine and fee reforms (months 12+).

The Fines and Fees Justice Center, The San Francisco Financial Justice Project, and PolicyLink will continue working with jurisdictions at the end of the 18-month period, to further the enactment of their reform plans and to share information about their efforts with other jurisdictions.

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Cities and counties will have wide latitude to determine their reform agenda. Below are typical examples of fines and fees applicants may want to consider addressing:

- Criminal justice administrative fees (e.g., fees for probation, electronic monitoring, and public defender services).
- Traffic and transportation fines and fees (e.g., parking and traffic tickets, towing and booting fines, and fines for fare evasion).
- Fees that generate revenue from incarcerated people and their support networks (e.g., marked-up prices for jail phone calls and commissary items)
- Fines for municipal code violations (e.g., loitering fines)
- Punitive collection practices (e.g., driver's license suspensions, wage garnishment, and warrants for failure to pay)

#### 4) What are examples of city and county leadership on fine and fee reform from across the country?

**San Francisco** — led by network partner [The San Francisco Financial Justice Project](#), based in the San Francisco Treasurer's office — has been a trailblazer in fine and fee reform since 2016. Seeking to advance reforms that will make a difference in people's lives and are possible for the courts and government departments to implement, the Financial Justice Project has worked to eliminate or adjust dozens of fines and fees. For a list of these reforms, please click [here](#).

**New York City** made all phone calls from jail free, lifting an economic burden off of incarcerated people and their families, and **Shelby County, TN**, made all phone calls to juvenile detention facilities free.

**Chicago** recently announced it would end driver's license suspensions for people who cannot pay city sticker fines and parking tickets; create more accessible payment plans for people who have trouble paying; and end the practice of writing up city sticker violators twice in one day.

**Durham, NC**, recently implemented a program in partnership with the District Attorney and the court to waive old traffic fines and fees and helped restore 35,000 driver's licenses that had been suspended for non-payment.

**Alameda County's** Board of Supervisors [voted](#) unanimously to eliminate criminal justice administrative fees in 2019, including fees charged for public defender services and monthly probation supervision fees.

**The City of Los Angeles** [voided](#) nearly 2 million minor citations and warrants that had kept people trapped in the court system. The announcement was designed to fix a system that has led to many people being repeatedly ticketed and [arrested for minor infractions](#), leading to growing fines and warrants.

More information on these and other local fine and fee reforms can be found on the Fines and Fees Justice Center's [Counties and Cities campaign page](#).

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## 5) What support will participating cities and counties receive?

Cities and counties that are selected will receive the following supports:

- \$50,000 in grants over 18 months to build capacity and enact reform.
- Individualized technical assistance provided by national experts, including local officials who have successfully passed reforms in their jurisdictions.
- Assistance to help localities productively engage community organizations in the process of reform.
- Access to best practices, promising policies, reform models, tools, and data.
- Structured learning opportunities, including in-person convenings, peer advising sessions, and recurring webinars.
- Assistance with budget/revenue forecasting, research, and drafting legislation, if needed.
- Media outreach support and assistance with the development of press releases and op-eds.

## 6) Who will receive grant funding and how can it be used?

All participants will be eligible to receive network grants. Participants may use the grants for any purpose related to advancing fine and fee reform. Examples of potential uses of the funding include, but are not limited to, supporting community engagement or hiring additional staff, contractors, or consultants. Applicants are not required to provide a budget or proposal for the use of the funds in their application.

## 7) Who started Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice?

Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice is a joint initiative of [PolicyLink](#), the San Francisco Office of the Treasurer's [Financial Justice Project](#), and the [Fines and Fees Justice Center](#).

**PolicyLink** is a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity by Lifting Up What Works. Over the last several years, PolicyLink has worked to [educate advocates and government leaders](#) about the harmful impact of fines and fees on low-income communities, particularly those of color. PolicyLink is a leading proponent of the Families Over Fees Act (also known as California Senate Bill 144), potentially groundbreaking legislation that would eliminate virtually all criminal justice administrative fees in California. PolicyLink is also a steering committee member of [Debt Free Justice California](#), a statewide coalition committed to ending criminal legal system policies that disproportionately penalize low-income people.

**The San Francisco Financial Justice Project** is the nation's first effort embedded in government to assess and reform fines, fees, and financial penalties disproportionately impacting low-income residents and communities of color. Working with city and county departments, the courts, and community organizations, the Financial Justice Project has spearheaded the elimination or reduction of dozens of fines and fees and lifted millions of dollars in debt off of tens of thousands of local residents.

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The Project's accomplishments are listed [here](#). A guide to available fine and fee discounts for San Francisco low-income residents is available [here](#).

**The Fines and Fees Justice Center** seeks to catalyze a movement to eliminate the fines and fees that distort justice. FFJC's goal is to eliminate fees in the justice system and to ensure that fines are equitably imposed and enforced. FFJC provides resources, makes critical connections, offers strategic advice, and serves as a hub for the fines and fees reform movement, working with impacted communities, researchers, advocates, legislators, justice system stakeholders, and media all across America. For more information on fines and fees work around the country please see the searchable FFJC Clearinghouse [here](#).

## **8) Who is eligible to participate in the network?**

To be eligible to apply, jurisdictions must:

- Represent a local jurisdiction (e.g., city, county, township); and
- Develop a team comprised of at least two individuals. Each team **must** include the following:
  - A senior government staff person who will serve as the team coordinator. As team coordinator, the staff person will be primarily responsible for ensuring the progression of the team's work, managing and convening the team, and communicating with the network and its coordinators.
  - Government official (elected jurisdiction-wide) with a commitment to advancing equity.
  - **Note:** Applicants are encouraged to think critically about the composition of their teams and to consider adding team members that possess the capacities or authority necessary to help advance reform.

## **9) What is the process for choosing network participants?**

To participate in the network, local jurisdictions must submit an application by 6:00 p.m. PT/9:00 p.m. ET on February 14, 2020. PolicyLink, The San Francisco Financial Justice Project, and the Fines and Fees Justice Center will jointly review all applications. The most promising applicants will be interviewed. Interviews will be conducted by video conference or phone and with as many members of the applicant team as possible. Final selections will be made by late March 2020.

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## **10) What should an applicant demonstrate to be successful?**

We anticipate that a successful applicant will demonstrate:

- Critical thinking about how to meaningfully engage community members and community-based organizations in the reform process;
- The participation or collaboration of:
  - Government staff with budget responsibilities;
  - Leaders of the executive and legislative branches;
  - Other court or government stakeholders and department staff necessary to implement reforms;
  - Community-based organizations; and/or
  - Research or academic institutions with the ability to gather and analyze data, such as a school of public policy or law school.
- A strong commitment to passing meaningful reforms.

## **11) What supplemental materials should applicants consider submitting?**

Applicants are encouraged, but not required, to submit the following items as part of their application:

- A brief letter from one or more high-level government officials (e.g., mayor, city manager, county executive, department or agency lead, city or county legislators) demonstrating support for the jurisdiction's participation in the network.
- A brief letter from key staff or leadership of any team member who is a nonprofit organization, expressing support for the organization's participation in the network.

## **12) What happens if your jurisdiction is not selected for the network?**

PolicyLink, The San Francisco Financial Justice Project, and the Fines and Fees Justice center will contact applicants who are not chosen for the network to determine what assistance can be provided to support those jurisdictions in their efforts to advance fine and fee reform.

## **13) What are key dates in the application process?**

Applications are due by 6:00 p.m. PT/9:00 p.m. ET on February 14, 2020.

If you have any questions regarding Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice, the application, or application process, please contact **Kasandra Kachakji**, at [Kasandra@policylink.org](mailto:Kasandra@policylink.org).