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PRESS CLIPPING

Circuit court cracking down on unpaid fines

Freeloaders who sneak out of DuPage County Circuit Court without settling their legal tabs won't be let off the hook much longer. Soon they'll have bill collectors hot on their trail.

The DuPage County state's attorney's office and the county circuit court clerk's office revealed a joint game plan June 14 for more aggressively pursuing the collection of unpaid court-ordered fines and fees in criminal cases. The expanded efforts for the compliance program include retaining the services of collection firms Harris & Harris of Chicago and the national AllianceOne, which will target an estimated \$20 million backlog of outstanding debt that has accumulated over two decades.

"If you are a deadbeat and haven't paid, it's going to haunt you," DuPage County State's Attorney Joseph Birkett said.

County officials said the renewed collection initiative, with a start date of Tuesday, Aug. 1, will recover money that should have gone into the county's general revenue accounts and that taxpayers will not incur any of the financial burden in the process. Instead, delinquents' bills will increase by up to 30 percent to compensate for collection agency charges under a new change in Illinois law, which empowers the circuit court clerk's office to more actively go after miscreants to seek reimbursement.

According to the program's organizational plan, start-up costs for the first year of operations are estimated at about \$90,000. But projections put collections revenue at \$627,000 during that same time period, so the program could be self-sustaining until the circuit court is done playing collection catchup.

DuPage County Circuit Court Clerk Chris Kachiroubas said residents have been picking up the slack by way of property taxes, which is an injustice because the county is entitled to fee payment. "This is a court order. This isn't a dinner bill you have the option of paying," he said. "There's a fairness issue because taxpayers are suffering in the meantime."

Until recently, legal fee and fine collections have been handled in-house using attorneys to go after debtors, sidetracking them from other responsibilities. Last year, Kachiroubas initiated his office's first-ever compliance unit, which served as a pilot program for larger collection undertakings. With Bill Maio at the helm, the unit recovered \$850,000 in overdue fines and judgments.

By contracting the work out, the circuit court could tap into the technological tracking resources of private collection firms to locate offenders and compel financial acquiescence if it is determined they are able to pay. County officials said more forceful means of exerting pressure—such as issuing contempt of court citations, arrest warrants and property liens—will be employed. As mandated by a state statute, courts can pursue accrued fees dating back 20 years. To avoid inflated costs, fine evaders can check www.dupagecase.com for outstanding debts and pay them electronically until Aug. 1.

Birkett said anecdotally, about 85 percent of those charged with fees or fines pay up. But he said he was eager to access the new source of money because the county is strapped for cash. As a bottom line, Birkett stressed the need to increase accountability. "We're going after criminals who thumbed their nose at the law," he said. "When you've exhausted all avenues in a courtroom, you have to pay."

By
Jessica Young
staff writer

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— Chris Kachiroubas
DuPage County
Circuit Court Clerk



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Harris & Harris, Ltd., 222 Merchandise Mart Plaza, Suite 1900, Chicago, IL 60654 P: 312.423.7421 or 866.781.4538 HarrisCollect.com

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