

For Immediate Release

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## **ArchCity Defenders files next debtors' prison lawsuit against Florissant, neighbor to Ferguson**

### **Thousands denied their civil rights while Florissant made \$14M**

St. Louis, Mo. (October 31, 2016) - ArchCity Defenders continues to fight to end cash bail, debtors' prisons, and the criminalization of poverty with a new federal class action lawsuit against the City of Florissant and in collaboration with Tycko and Zavareei, LLP, a Washington DC-based class action law firm. The lawsuit alleges the City of Florissant operated a debtors' prison and subjected the named plaintiffs and thousands of class members to abject suffering while jailed for their poverty.

"Thirty years after the Supreme Court ruled that people cannot be jailed for their inability to pay, the legal system treats justice as a commodity and criminalizes black life as well as poverty. Florissant is yet another painful reminder that our legal system demands that poor people pay from the minimal resources they have or spend time in a cage," said Thomas Harvey, Executive Director of ArchCity Defenders. "Such practices exploit the most vulnerable among us, destroy confidence in the legal system, and do nothing to protect public safety. We're thrilled to join ArchCity Defenders and hope we can help bring these practices to an end," said Jeff Kaliel, co-counsel with Tycko and Zavareei.

Between 2011 to 2015, the City of Florissant filed 151,026 cases and generated approximately \$14 million through its municipal court, mostly for infractions of minor municipal traffic codes. Drivers who are unable to pay their fines or who miss court dates arising from minor traffic violations are automatically hit with warrants for their arrest, and Florissant locks these people in jail until they can pay an arbitrary "bond" amount—or until it becomes clear that city cannot extract any money from them. In 2015 alone, Florissant issued 28,436 arrest warrants, which averages to 1.3 warrants issued for every household simply because people could not pay the City.

The upcoming lawsuit alleges violations of the 14th Amendment's equal protection and due process clauses, the 6th Amendment right to counsel and the right to a hearing to determine a person's ability to pay. As evidenced from this lawsuit and previous complaints, these Constitutional violations disproportionately impact poor people and people of color in the St. Louis region in order to generate revenue and exert social control.

The complaint, available here, details the inhumane and exploitative system engineered by Florissant's municipal court and police department. Men and women have lost their jobs, housing, and contact with family members. They have been forced to surrender their time and dignity and have been denied forms of basic hygiene, i.e. showers, toothbrushes, and medication. Named plaintiffs went without water for days because the water source was an unsanitary spout connected to a filthy toilet that reeked of excrement.

ArchCity Defenders seeks injunctive, declaratory, and compensatory relief for the plaintiffs and the thousands of class members who have been disproportionately targeted, arrested, and jailed.

This complaint, filed in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri Eastern Division, follows a litany of impact litigation brought by ArchCity Defenders and co-counsel partners. In August, ArchCity Defenders filed a debtors' prison federal class action against [thirteen towns](#) in St. Louis County, alleging one municipality acted as a hub to carry out the unlawful scheme.

To date, ArchCity Defenders has settled lawsuits with the [City of Jennings and Velda City](#) that have ended cash bail, debtors' prison, and revenue based policing practices. A similar lawsuit against the City of Ferguson is still pending.

[ArchCity Defenders](#), is a nonprofit civil rights law firm committed to providing holistic legal advocacy and to combating the criminalization of poverty and state violence against poor people and people of color.

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