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For Immediate Release

## **ArchCity Defenders files federal debtors' prison lawsuit against the City of Foristell and St. Charles County**

Complaint highlights the extensive, ghastly nature of illegally jailing poor and black people

December 6, 2016 (St. Louis, Mo.) - ArchCity Defenders has filed a federal debtors' prison lawsuit on behalf of Ms. Nicole Bolden, a mother and St. Louis resident, against the City of Foristell in St. Charles County, Missouri, for illegally jailing Ms. Bolden for her inability to pay traffic tickets and fines. This is the first debtors' prison lawsuit filed against St. Charles County by ArchCity Defenders, a nonprofit civil rights law firm, and reveals the extensive nature of the discriminatory practices that ensnare poor people and black people in the region, causing catastrophic consequences for their families.

"Ms. Bolden's story is, sadly, but one of thousands in the region," said Thomas Harvey, Executive Director and Co-Founder of ArchCity Defenders. "Too many children have seen their parents arrested in front of them because they could afford to pay a city money. The unlawful practices of our region impact our clients, their children and their families in profoundly devastating ways."

In March 2014, Ms. Bolden was in a car accident that changed her life. Though she was not at fault, the responding officer arrested Ms. Bolden in front of her children due to outstanding warrants from three jurisdictions stemming from her poverty. Ms. Bolden was forced to do the "muni-shuffle" and was bounced from jail to jail in Florissant, Hazelwood, Dellwood, Saint Louis County, and then St. Charles County. During that time, each town demanded Ms. Bolden pay cash to buy her freedom. Ms. Bolden spent sleepless nights in Florissant, Dellwood, and Hazelwood's jails while her family raised hundreds of dollars to pay the cash bond. After paying each municipality in Saint Louis County, Ms. Bolden was transported to St. Charles and told she would have to pay \$1,758.00 to the City of Foristell or remain in jail until her court date, which was over a month away.

In St. Charles, Ms. Bolden said the conditions were unsanitary and deplorable. She shared a cell with women charged with felonies, one of whom was going through severe heroin withdrawal. Ms. Bolden shared a cell with a woman who vomited in the cell while her jailers refused to clean it up. The showers in the St. Charles County jail were filthy and bugs flew from

the drain when the water was turned on. Ms. Bolden went two weeks without access to proper hygiene and could not access medical treatment to address her pain from the car accident.

After ArchCity Defenders' Co-Founder Michael-John Voss filed a motion to reduce Ms. Bolden's bond, Ms. Bolden's mother borrowed \$700 from her life insurance policy to secure her daughter's release from Foristell. As a result of being illegally jailed, Ms. Bolden missed a job interview, was abruptly separated from her children for two weeks, and has had to shoulder the emotional and financial burden of this injustice.

"All of this hardship over traffic tickets? That cannot be right. When did anyone have a regard for my legal rights, my inability to pay such a high bond, my health or hygiene? All of the wrongful actions have taken a toll on me," stated Ms. Nicole Bolden.

Between 2011 to 2015, the City of Foristell, a town of 500 people, collected over \$2,459,306, issued over 3,000 warrants, and filed 17,790 cases in its municipal court, 74% of which were for non-drug or alcohol related traffic matters. While the estimated average cost to operate Foristell Municipal Court is \$96,000 annually, public records indicate that over a five year period, the City earned at least \$2,940,000 from its municipal court fines, fees, costs, and surcharges. Additionally, a December 2015 audit report by the Missouri State Auditor's Office found that the City had underreported the amount of revenue collected from traffic violations.

In 2016, ArchCity Defenders has filed federal debtors' prison claims against numerous cities in Saint Louis County: St. Ann, Edmundson, Normandy, Cool Valley, Velda City, Beverly Hills, Pagedale, Calverton Park, St. John, Bel-Ridge, Wellston, Velda Village Hills, Bellefontaine Neighbors, Florissant, and Maplewood. The federal complaint against the City of Foristell and St. Charles County, is the first debtors' prison claim made outside of Saint Louis County and a copy of it may be found [here](#).

The litany of civil rights impact litigation has begun to usher meaningful legal reform to the region's municipalities. Lawsuits filed by [ArchCity Defenders](#) and co-counsel partners have ended illegal practices such as cash bail, debtors' prison, and revenue based policing. Attorneys estimate that at least 45,000 people in the region are impacted by the federal civil rights litigation filed by ArchCity Defenders.

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