

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Media Contact:

Rebecca L. Gorley  
(855) 724-2489 x1025  
rgorley@archcitydefenders.org

## **Civil Rights Lawyers Settle Historic Debtors' Prison Class Action and Create Model for Meaningful Reform for St. Louis' Municipal Courts Federal Judge Finalizes Terms of Landmark \$4.7M Settlement Reached with Jennings**

December 15, 2016 (St. Louis, Mo.) -- Yesterday, a federal judge approved the terms of a landmark debtors' prison class action brought by ArchCity Defenders, Saint Louis University Law School's Legal Clinic, and Civil Rights Corp against the City of Jennings. The terms of the Jennings' settlement are enforceable in Federal Court and end illegal practices such as cash bail, debtors' prisons, and payment dockets. The settlement is for \$4.7 million and includes debt forgiveness of approximately \$2 million. While ArchCity Defenders' clients will receive the highest per diem pay out in a debtors' prison case to date, it is merely a drop in the bucket for the decades long, intergenerational damage that families have survived.

"I'm happy about the agreement but there is so much more to do for people who have been ensnared and exploited by the system, in order to help them get back to some semblance of stability in their lives, and that's a stark reminder that we have to get back to work," said Thomas Harvey, Executive Director of ArchCity Defenders. "The amount of money that we can secure with these settlements, pales in comparison to the damages that people have survived. Until the legal system begins to treat poor people and black people with a modicum of respect and with the humanity they deserve, we're going to keep fighting this fight."

The lawsuit against Jennings was filed in February 2015, and was brought on behalf of the 2,000 people who languished nearly 9,000 days in the City of Jennings jail solely because they were not able to pay traffic tickets and court fines. Less than two years later, attorneys have indicated that this settlement could be a model for the region and represent minimum standards for future litigation.

"No human being should be kept in a cage because she cannot make a monetary payment. This groundbreaking settlement brings us a big step toward eradicating the scourge of wealth-based human caging that we have allowed to pervade our modern American legal system," said Alec Karakatsanis, Founder and Executive Director of Civil Rights Corp, a nonprofit organization dedicated to challenging systemic injustice in the American legal system.

“While this ruling holds promise for similar cases, impact litigation can only go so far to achieve racial and economic equity for poor people and black people who have been exploited by cities’ courts, police, and jails,” said Brendan Roediger, from Saint Louis University School of Law Legal Clinics.

ArchCity Defenders has established a court watch model, published two white papers, and filed two dozen lawsuits challenging illegal practices of the region’s courts and police departments. In 2016 alone, ArchCity Defenders filed lawsuits against sixteen other municipalities in the region for allegations akin to Jennings.

Such pervasive policies ensnare families into vicious cycles of poverty, forcing parents to lose jobs, vehicles, and take out payday loans to make ends meet. In fact, four named plaintiffs in the Jennings lawsuit are also named plaintiffs in the debtors’ prison case against the City of Ferguson, also filed in February 2015, which is currently in discovery.

[ArchCity Defenders](#) is committed to providing holistic legal advocacy and to combating state violence against poor people and people of color.

###

@archcitydefense

ArchCity Defenders, Inc.