

Lawsuits Challenge Debtors' Prisons Practices in Jennings and Ferguson

St. Louis, Mo. (Feb. 8, 2015) - Twenty citizens of St. Louis County filed class action suits in Federal Court claiming that their civil rights have been violated by the cities of Ferguson and Jennings. These citizens were jailed in deplorable conditions for unpaid fines, costs, and fees for traffic tickets and other minor ordinance violations. The suit against Ferguson has eleven plaintiffs; the suit against Jennings has nine plaintiffs. These lawsuits are the latest in a rash of litigation challenging the abusive practices of the municipalities' police and courts which affect disproportionately people of color and the poor.

Plaintiffs in the two suits are represented by attorneys Alec Karakatsanis of the Washington-based non-profit organization Equal Justice Under Law; Thomas Harvey and Michael-John Voss of ArchCity Defenders, a nonprofit organization serving the homeless and working poor; and Professors Brendan Roediger, John Ammann and Stephen Hanlon of the Saint Louis University School of Law Legal Clinics.

The conditions of the Ferguson and Jennings jail in which these citizens were held are inhumane. The plaintiffs describe being forced into overcrowded cells, denied regular showers, and going without adequate medical care or basic sanitation. They were denied even a toothbrush and toothpaste. Request for clean clothes were refused, and prisoners lived and slept in filthy conditions. As though this physical degradation were insufficient, the plaintiffs describe being verbally abused by the officers running the jail. The conditions within the jail act as a means of coercion to ensure that people pay fines. While an individual is incarcerated, the police and jail officials arbitrarily change the amount of cash family members or friends need to bring in order to see their loved one freed. Thus, indigent citizens become trapped in an endless cycle of debt and are thrown into cages because of that debt, while more affluent citizens in similar situations pay and are released.

“Because they generate so much revenue, many towns in our region attempt to squeeze every dollar possible out of defendants and their families by jailing citizens who are not criminals, and who are not a threat to society,”

Thomas Harvey, Executive Director of ArchCity Defenders

“These suits are another step in making the public aware of the abuses which result from for-profit policing and illegal practices in many municipal courts. When cities operate their police departments and municipal courts for profit, they ignore constitutional protections for defendants and jail them in squalid conditions in the hope those defendants will beg relatives and friends to pay their fines to obtain their release.”

Professor Brendan Roediger of the SLU LAW Legal Clinics

The suits seek a declaration that the cities' policies violated the civil rights of the plaintiffs, an injunction to stop the illegal practices, and damages.

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