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typically 12 months.

If the debt goes to collections, another 28 percent of the balance due is added to the bill. After that, the debt could accrue 9 percent interest, however Oregon's State Court Administrator has waived interest since 2007 due to challenges with calculating it accurately on over 1.4 million cases, explained Phillip Lemman, Deputy State Court Administrator Oregon Judicial Department.

Municipal and county justice courts, however, play by their own rules.

These courts come up with their own collections, administrative and payment plan fees – which vary widely – and many have contracts with private collection agencies that do charge a 9 percent interest rate.

A low-income defendant is also more likely to spend more time in jail when they can't pay bail, to lose their driver's license after getting a traffic fine and to be found in contempt of court for failing to pay their probation fees. The consequences of nonpayment, themselves, come with additional fines and fees attached. In circuit courts, there's a $15 charge for notifying the DMV to suspend a person's driver's license. In some municipal courts, the notification fee is higher.

According to records gathered from various jurisdictions in Oregon, Mount Angel charges $35 for second payment reminder letters, and in Cottage Grove, debtors pay 10 percent extra in wage garnishment fees if the city goes after their paychecks.

Some Oregon municipalities, such as Cave Junction and Burns, threaten jail time or arrest warrants for those who don't pay their tickets.

Once a debt is paid off on traffic tickets, the driver will have to pay another $75 if they want their license reinstated.

That's what Mendoza did when she paid off the ticket she was written in Wasco County five years later. But before she got her license back, she had been pulled over and ticketed for driving while under suspension in Beaverton. When she missed one $100 payment on her Beaverton debt because she couldn't afford it that month, her license was immediately suspended again. She'd had it back for only one month.

Some Oregonians whose licenses were suspended told Street Roots they'd forgone food or other necessities, such as health insurance, in order to make payments or because their wages were garnished, and this, in turn, affects their whole household.

As long as a debt is owed on a criminal case, a defendant is not eligible for expunging the conviction from their record, which can affect housing and employment options.

It's a system of punishment with consequences that are harsher, farther reaching and longer lasting for poor defendants.

Even those who try to make good on their debts by immediately setting up a payment plan and paying on time each month end up paying as much as 128 percent more than the original fine amount, according to the Oregon Judicial Department.

In Oregon, defendants are often surprised and discouraged when they realize how greatly their debts have grown – it's as if

PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

Cindy Mendoza sits with her 2-year-old son, Angel, in the waiting area at Oregon Law Center. What started as a $400 traffic fine for Mendoza snowballed into more than $11,000 in debt.

they had borrowed from a predatory payday lender.

Mendoza was shocked to discover tickets she received in Beaverton, originally assessed at $870, had grown to more than $2,000. In all, she owes more than $11,000 to various courts for traffic-related incidents, including an accident that resulted in a misdemeanor charge for driving while suspended. But for Mendoza, it might as well be $11 million.

After living in a homeless shelter for the past year and half, she's finally moved her family to a subsidized apartment, and keeping it is paramount. When her advocate at Human Solutions told her about a flagging program with Oregon Tradeswomen, Mendoza thought she'd finally found an opportunity to get on her feet again, but she soon discovered that without a driver's license, she couldn't become certified. Now she's battling depression. Holding back tears, she told Street Roots that all she wants right now is for her family to be happy and for her kids to "have no more worries."

The state of Oregon expects to collect close to $144 million in criminal fines and fees during the 2017 to 2019 biennium.

In addition to traffic tickets and court fines and fees, this also includes fees for public defender services, court administration fees, interest and probation and parole fees.

These fees can be especially burdensome for those coming out of prison. While their debt to society in the form of a lengthy prison sentence may have been paid, their monetary obligations are often waiting for them when they get out. With a criminal record and few job prospects, this can present additional barriers when their fees end up in collections or cause their driving privileges to be revoked.

While 73 percent of Oregon's overall criminal and traffic fines and fees are paid within 30 days of judgment, during the past 20 years, just 37 percent of felony-related fines and fees have been collected.

In 2015, among more than 20,000 felony cases where a fine was imposed, the average fine was $439. Cases with restitution averaged $9,350 owed to the victim, and about half of the felony cases were billed for public defense averaging $513. And more than 75 percent had collections fees tacked on, averaging $167. According to the Oregon Judicial Department, some of the payment plans would take hundreds of years to pay off at current schedules.

Some states have begun to recognize the systemic racism and economic unfairness built in to monetary sanctions, and they're finding remedies.

Oregon is one of 43 states that suspend a person's driver's license for inability to pay a traffic ticket. In May, The Washington Post reported more than 7 million people in the United States have lost their license for this reason.

But in 2017, both California and Mississippi ended this practice, and both states reinstated licenses that had been suspended due to failure to pay. In other states, such as Montana, Michigan and Virginia, lawsuits challenging the suspension policy are popping up. This summer in Tennessee, a federal judge ruled that to take a person's driver's license for nonpayment of fines is a violation of the due process and equal protection clauses of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

In September, a federal class-action lawsuit was filed against Oregon's state transportation agencies seeking a similar judgment. Oregon Law Center is representing six clients, including Mendoza, who all lost their licenses for failing to pay their traffic violation debts. Attorneys on the case argue Oregon's policy of suspending licenses for nonpayment punishes people for being poor, in violation of the 14th Amendment.

Attorneys also filed an injunction, asking that the state immediately reinstate the plaintiffs' licenses and cease its practice of automatically suspending licenses for monetary reasons without giving debtors a chance to demonstrate that they can't pay. As of press time, this injunction was still awaiting a decision.

When Foster was working at the U.S. Department of Justice in 2016, she sent a letter on behalf of its Civil Rights Division to every state's court administrator and chief justice clarifying that several common state practices involving fines and fees are actually unconstitutional. Among them was the practice of suspending a driver's license for nonpayment without adequate procedural protections.

"Before a state can impose a sanction for nonpayment, it has to find that the person willfully refused to pay, and that means they have the ability to pay. That law is absolutely clear with respect to incarceration," Foster said. "The same applies to sanctions like drivers license suspensions. You're sanctioning someone just because they're poor."

Then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions revoked the letter in December 2017.

But it's not just driver's license suspension policies that have been targeted for potential reform due to their impact on poor Oregonians.

In 2017, the Oregon Legislature passed House Bill 2238, creating the Task Force on Public Safety. Its 13 members have been charged, in part, with studying the impact of criminal fines and fees.

Task force member and Yamhill County judge, John Collins, said that while the group is still in the beginning stages of examining this issue, he believes that it's a problem and that courts need to establish better ways of determining a person's ability to pay.

Some fines and fees may be reduced or waived, but not all. Changing that would require legislative changes to Oregon state statutes. But even when a fine is eligible for reduction, that reduction is largely at the discretion of the judge, and the defendant must show up for court.

Collins said many people, regardless of whether they can afford the fine, will agree to the presumptive amount, or they're charged that amount because they missed their opportunity to go before a judge and ask for a reduction.

Mendoza, homeless when she received several of her tickets, wasn't able to attend most court dates. Twice, she and her sons were living in her vehicle at the time she was cited. Police impounded two of her cars because she was driving without insurance. Unable to pay the towing and impound fees, she never recovered her vehicles.

She said she tried to explain her situation to the police, once in Portland when they took her 15-year-old Honda Accord, and another time in Milwaukie when they impounded her 2001 Jeep Cherokee Laredo.

"They saw everything. They saw the blankets – the whole back, I had it into a bed," she said. "They were like, 'Just grab what you need: grab your passport, your birth certificates, everything you need, the important stuff, and you've gotta walk.'"

It was too difficult to get back to

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