

COURTS

First-ever RI court debt relief event cancels out over \$360K in fines and fees



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PROVIDENCE — Judges forgave more than \$360,000 in court fines and fees Thursday in the first-ever state Superior Court Debt Review program, organizers said.

At least 114 people, owing about \$382,500 in Superior Court costs, saw \$360,815 canceled during the day-long session at the Nonviolence Institute, according to Sarah J. Martino, deputy director of the Center for Health and Justice Transformation at The Miriam Hospital.

“It was a really beautiful day! Lots of people's lives changed,” Martino said.

Tarah Dorsey, a community health worker at the Transitions Clinic, was arranging for clients to attend the debt-relief session when it occurred to her that she was also facing costs from a 2007 conviction. In fact, she owed \$4,038 — debt that hung over her head for years and left her in fear of being picked up on a warrant if she was unable to make a payment.

Dorsey told the judge Thursday about changes in her life that led her to help others keep on a straight path as a peer support specialist and community health worker. He remitted her debt.

“I thought ‘Well, I hit the lottery today.’ I could actually take a deep breath and breathe,” Dorsey, 43, said.

No longer does she need to worry about being arrested and held on a warrant — a huge relief as the parent of a 6-year-old.

Program grew from effort to raise public confidence in courts

The debt review program grew from the work of the state Supreme Court Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts, a panel created by Chief Justice Paul A. Suttell in 2020 in the wake of the death of George Floyd in Minnesota to raise public confidence in the independence, integrity and impartiality of the Rhode Island Judiciary.

The committee has delved into areas where court policies and procedures could lead to unfairness and disparate impacts on racial- and ethnic-minority communities. One such area was court costs.

After community forums with stakeholders, the committee, the Center for Health and Justice Transformation, and the Reentry Campus Program decided to stage the debt review program at the Nonviolence Institute.

Two makeshift Superior Court courtrooms were set up, with Judges Luis Matos, Sarah Taft-Carter and Richard Raspallo presiding. Magistrate Alan Goulart oversaw the Traffic Tribunal sessions.

Neutral setting helped defuse tensions

“So, so many people walked out with tears of joy,” said Shivani Nishar, an AmeriCorps VISTA fellow with the Center for Health and Justice Transformation who helped Martino organize the proceedings.

Locating the event in the community eased the power dynamic people often experience in court, she said. She witnessed the vibe change throughout the day from nervous energy to lighthearted relief. She credited the judges with being friendly and kind to all who came before them.

“A lot of people have anxiety about going to the courthouse and speaking to judges,” Nishar said.

Nishar and others hope that Thursday’s program will be the first of many and represent a key step in the full implementation of a 2008 reform requiring Superior and District court judges to assess a defendant’s ability to pay court fees and fines. That law, which gives judges the discretion to waive fines and fees, but not restitution, has been applied sporadically since its passage.