

Parole fee burdens ex-offenders

Average \$750 debt hinders efforts to rebuild life after prison, study says

By Julie Scharper

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A monthly fee charged to Maryland parolees often grows to a burdensome debt that hinders their attempts to build a life after prison and runs counter to the mission of the parole program, according to a study that will be released this week.

More than 80 percent of parolees do not pay the state parole supervision fee on time and some consider committing crimes to pay the fee, which amounts to an average of \$750, according to the Brennan Center for Justice at the New York University Law School. The report recommends that the state abandon the fee or streamline the process for financially strapped parolees to apply for an exemption.

"The population of people on parole is more or less indigent," said Rebekah Diller, the study's principal author. "They're struggling at the most basic level to find housing and to find a job. The people we interviewed talked about the fact that this was yet another source of pressure. They felt like they were behind before they even started their lives after prison."

But advocates for lower taxes said it only seems fair that parolees should shoulder some of the costs of the services that they receive.

"I would suggest that, rather than being abolished, this fee should be raised," said Herb McMillan, president of the Maryland Taxpayers' Association and a former state representative. "Fees save money for taxpayers. I think it's fair that the individual should bear some of the cost of their parole."

The \$40 monthly fee, which was mandated by the state legislature in 1991, generates about \$350,000 a year for the state's general fund, according to the report.

Most people on parole do not have the money to pay the fee, Diller said. At the end of their parole, only about one-third of former inmates have found a job and many do not have permanent housing, according to the report.

Andrea Brinkley, 38, a mother of three, said her parole debt is difficult with the money she earns cleaning a hospital. She said that she did not realize that she owed the fee until she received a bill for \$2,200 in October - six months after she completed parole.

"I couldn't believe it," Brinkley said. "I had just cleaned up my credit from when I was living the wrong life, and then here I was back in debt again."

Brinkley, an East Baltimore resident, said that when she was sent to prison for two years for a drug conviction in 2002, she had spent nearly her entire adult life selling drugs and had no job skills. Since then, she has stopped using drugs, regained custody of her children and worked hard - first as a waitress at IHOP and now as a housekeeper at Mercy Hospital - but the debt is disheartening, she said.

"As hard as I've worked to get where I am, the last thing I want is something like this hanging over my head," she said.

Only 17 percent pay the fee before they complete parole. Many parolees are intimidated by letters that inform them that they could be found in violation of parole for not paying the fee, according to the report,

which is based on records provided by the Maryland Division of Parole and Probation and interviews with parole officers and parolees.

Offenders are not charged with violating parole solely for not paying the supervision fee, although it is one of the factors considered if the person had committed other offenses, said Patrick McGee, director of the Division of Parole and Probation.

The supervision fee is one of many that parolees might be required to pay, McGee said. Many owe restitution, court costs and charges for drug testing. Parole officers are responsible for drawing up payment plans and collecting those fees, in addition to helping parolees seek work and readjust to life outside prison.

"We collect millions of dollars each year; that's a huge impact on our workload," McGee said. "If we didn't have to collect the money and it was done by someone else, we'd have more time to work with offenders in other things like finding jobs."

Although parole officers are responsible for collecting the supervision fee, they do not help parolees obtain exemptions. Only the Maryland Parole Commission, a separate office, can excuse a parolee from paying. Because the process is complicated, only a fraction of eligible parolees apply for and are granted an exemption, according to the study.

Once a person completes parole, the unpaid debt is turned over to the state's collection agency. The bills can be staggering for someone newly released from prison, said Monique Dixon, the head of the crime and juvenile justice program at the Open Society Institute, which sponsored the study along with the Abell Foundation.

"Even though \$40 a month is not a big hardship for many people, it's a huge hardship for people making minimum wage," Dixon said. "The stress of trying to pay this and the stress of trying to live day to day can be very discouraging for people trying to put their lives back together after prison."

The fee will be discussed at a forum at the Open Society Institute on Thursday.

Although the fee creates some problems, McGee said, he does not recommend that the state do away with it.

"In many ways, imposing fees and fines is a good way for people to pay back their debts to society," he said.

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