

FINANCE MEETING

November 19, 2014

The Cumberland County Finance Meeting was held on Wednesday, November 19, 2014 at 1:30 p.m., Commissioners' Hearing Room, Courthouse, Carlisle, PA. Present were Commissioners Barbara Cross, Jim Hertzler and Gary Eichelberger; Larry Thomas, Chief Clerk; Denny Lebo, Clerk of Courts; Melissa Calvanelli, Court Administrator; Mike Hinkle, Missy Horner, Collections Specialist Unit, Court Administration; Darcy Christlieb, Adult Probation; Daniel Walmer, The Sentinel.

Chief Clerk Thomas welcomed everyone to the Finance meeting.

This meeting is being held to revisit one of the key initiatives regarding the Mission Review. A key area is an increase in opportunities for the Collections Specialist Unit (CSU) to collect court fines and make future recommendations. Fifty-One percent of all conviction fees from 2005-2007 went unpaid. In 2013, this percentage fell to twenty-one percent.

There was a brief discussion regarding the creation of the CSU. It was created because of the steep decline in payments. Missy Horner joined the Unit in the past three weeks. Mike Hinkle has been with the CSU since September 2014. He has knowledge of the Court System as well as collections experience. Mike Varner of Adult Probation was an advocate for the creation of the CSU.

In the past ten years the total unpaid criminal fees is in the amount of \$13.3 million. There is \$21.7 million in unpaid victim restitution fees.

Since 1990 there have been numerous offenders not on a payment plan. It was questioned whether those individuals have left the County with no forwarding contact information or are they deceased.

Two options were discussed to fix the system moving forward:

- Because of limited resources, present and future cases should be addressed first, OR
- To try to collect old accounts receivables

There is a need to collect fees and restitution in a more efficient manner. One item being discussed is the creation of drop boxes. This option will make it more convenient for individuals to make their payments if they are unable to come into the Courthouse to pay fees during regular hours of operation.

These potential cash only drop box locations will be secure and under twenty-four hour surveillance:

- The Courthouse
- The Prison Lobby and possibly Booking
- The Police Departments

A brief discussion ensued regarding payment with cash. This is still a very popular payment method. The drop boxes must be secure. There could be a risk that people may say they placed an envelope in the drop box but really they did not. Someone could possibly try to take an envelope out of the drop box. If the drop boxes are utilized, there should be a follow up within the next few months. The probation officers know their clients and they know that they need an easier way to pay their fees.

Also discussed was the value payment system. This is a swipe credit card system that will set up reoccurring payments. It was noted that this process is not for Common Pleas but there are other departments that may benefit from this system.

Mike Hinkle discussed holding an Amnesty Week for offenders. The offenders will have their Warrants vacated in exchange for the offenders to voluntarily make payments and create a payment schedule. This may take place as early as December 2014. A short time after this occurs, a Warrant sweep can be issued to arrest those individuals that did not make a good faith showing. Constables can be utilized in this process.

There was a brief discussion regarding wage garnishment. It is highly encouraged but it can only be achieved on a voluntary basis.

Ideas regarding payment also touched on individuals in the State Prison and the possibility that money can be collected from the books.

It was noted that ideally the payment system should begin immediately after the court has ordered it. Payment success is measured by the amount of funds collected in the first year.

During Mr. Hinkle's investigation, he found 109 individuals were on a payment plan but no one was responsible to follow up with these payment plans. He found that seven people were deceased, two were in a State facility, one was found not guilty and should be removed from the books and two individuals stated that they do not need to pay.

Individuals under a payment plan must be tracked and monitored. The Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC) was discussed as well as what may be owed in Cumberland County. It was suggested Mike Clapsadl would be a good source for advice in the research of this information.

Darby Christlieb said that once a defendant becomes a probation case, to move it forward it would be beneficial for the probation officer to work together with Mr. Hinkle and Ms. Horner. There was a brief discussion regarding the legal ramifications of searching for defendants' financial information.

Some of the Magisterial District Justices have agreed to forward their completed paperwork to the County when an individual applies for a public defender. This will be a help to better gauge a defendant's ability to pay.

Commissioner Hertzler spoke about the outstanding unpaid criminal fees. Everyone must be on a payment plan. Even defendants that have dropped out of sight should be found because they still owe money to the victims of these crimes. All available tools should be utilized. There are other avenues that can be investigated to help find missing defendants. There is software that is being discussed that will be valuable and cost effective.

It was discussed that Constables may be able to have radio access. These details are ongoing at a steady pace with the Police Chiefs and the Sheriff's Office. The Sheriff's Office's Facebook may also help make an impact with payment of fees.

A collection agency is currently being used but there may be other agencies that can be used. This will be addressed in the near future.

An Advisory Board is being created in December and they will meet before the end of this year.

The reality is that this is a big task. Key items have been discussed and the CSU is working on numerous projects that are being tested. They are working with people directly involved in this process and they are taking it very seriously. This process will take time to implement.

Commissioner Cross said that the CSU's work has been impressive and it shows that our County is serious about collecting payments.

In February 2015 the Board of Commissioners will meet with the CSU for another quarterly update meeting.

The next Finance Meeting is scheduled for November 26, 2014 at 1:30 p.m. The topic is Recycling & Waste Update.

Respectfully submitted,

Laurie J. Mazarella
Administrative Coordinator