

# Wichita Falls court gets help in collecting unpaid fines

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WICHITA FALLS, Texas - The city of Wichita Falls is taking aim at thousands of people with outstanding fines, but its efforts won't cost taxpayers a dime, a municipal court spokesman said Tuesday.

Of the approximately 10,000 unpaid fines in the city database — including parking tickets, code violations and misdemeanor criminal citations — the court is unable to track down the offenders in about half of those cases, said Stan Horton, municipal court administrator.

Horton said that because of a new computer operating system used by the city, he is unable to provide an approximate value of the unpaid fines.

Generally, he said, an offender with an outstanding fine is contacted by a city marshal to remind them of the debt. If the fine remains unpaid, the offender may be arrested and jailed on a warrant.

But that system doesn't work in every case.

“We have some old citations in which we were unable to contact (the offender) or effect the arrest at all,” Horton said.

Starting July 1, the court will contract with law firm Perdue, Brandon, Fielder, Collins and Mott to track down its hardest-to-find debtors — the law firm specializes in finding people and using that information to collect outstanding fees and fines, said Tony Fidelie, a partner at the firm.

He said a state statute enacted in 2003 allowed firms like his to collect their payment from the offenders themselves, instead of from the governmental entities with whom they contract. If the firm successfully aids in collecting a debt, an extra 30 percent is tacked on to the fine, which the firm claims.

Perdue, Brandon, Fielder, Collins and Mott, which has an office in Wichita Falls, has about 2,000 clients statewide.

“The beauty in the statute is the city doesn’t have to pay for it. The individuals who take care of business don’t have to pay for it,” Fidelie said. “All we are is another tool for (the city) to bring in the money that’s owed.”

Though Fidelie said his firm is successful, he also said it is unlikely for it to post a 100 percent success rate on its contract. The State Bar of Texas forbids any firm from promising a specific rate of success.

Only offenders whose payment is 60 days delinquent will be sought, Fidelie said.

Individuals contacted by the law firm can expect to receive letters and calls, he said, and will likely have an active warrant for their arrest. Horton said those contacted should make a payment online or contact the municipal court immediately.

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