

Win for WA's poorest as lower house vote for common sense justice across political divides.

Social Reinvestment WA, 15th November 2019.

Yesterday Members of WA's Legislative Assembly from governing ALP, the Liberals, and the Nationals voted in favour of Attorney General John Quigley's Fines, Penalties, Infringements Enforcement Act Amendment Bill (2019), to provide alternative options for those who cannot pay fines, effectively ending imprisonment of fine defaulters.

Social Reinvestment WA who consulted heavily in creation of the bill, and advocated to members from all political parties to end imprisonment for unpaid fines have hailed this is a **victory for WA's most disadvantaged groups**.

In 2017/18 WA sent 813 people to prison for being unable to pay their fines.

Women, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are disproportionately over represented in this group. Overwhelmingly, those that end up in prison for unpaid fines are the poorest members of our community, who had little to no capacity to pay these fines in the first place.

"It's not just about tackling crime and violence in our communities, it's about tackling that in a fair and just way. And that's not by locking people up for unpaid fines. Imprisoning people for minor offences sends people already living in disadvantage into a downward spiral. And I think as a community, we are better than that." – Sharryn Jackson, Executive Director Community Legal WA.

Our existing fine default system is also economically irresponsible. **Currently it costs approximately \$750 a day to imprison someone for a short-term sentence.** Their fine is only 'earned off' at a rate of \$250 a day. The actual fine amount is never recouped.

The dire need for these reforms was made clear with the tragic death of Ms Dhu in police custody, and the corresponding coronial inquest. Ms Dhu had been brought into custody due to unpaid fines, which ultimately resulted in her losing her life. **It is hoped these reforms will reduce Aboriginal incarceration, and contribute to ending needless deaths in custody.**

The Bill provides fair alternate options for people who are unable to pay their fines, notably a Work and Development Permit scheme where fine defaulters can opt to do community service work, and undertake rehabilitation or development to prevent the root causes of their offending.

"We congratulate the Assembly for putting aside political differences to vote for these reforms. The next step is for this common sense bill to be given support again in the upper house, and paired with effective resourcing to enable the already stretched community services sector to provide alternative options." - Sophie Stewart, Campaign Coordinator, Social Reinvestment WA.

WA is the last state in the country to still imprison people for unpaid fines, not as an act of absolute last resort.

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