



**Letter to the Florida Legislature Supporting the Debt-Free Justice for Children Act  
January 12, 2021**

The Honorable Danny Burgess, Chair Judiciary Committee, Florida State Senate  
The Honorable Audrey Gibson, Vice Chair Judiciary Committee, Florida State Senate  
The Honorable Dennis Baxley, Judiciary Committee, Florida State Senate  
The Honorable Jim Boyd, Judiciary Committee, Florida State Senate  
The Honorable Jennifer Bradley, Judiciary Committee, Florida State Senate  
The Honorable Doug Broxson, Judiciary Committee, Florida State Senate  
The Honorable Debbie Mayfield, Judiciary Committee, Florida State Senate  
The Honorable Tina Polsky, Judiciary Committee, Florida State Senate  
The Honorable Ray Rodrigues, Judiciary Committee, Florida State Senate  
The Honorable Darryl Ervin Rouson, Judiciary Committee, Florida State Senate  
Tom Cibula, Staff Director Judiciary Committee, Florida State Senate  
The Honorable Robert Charles Brannan III, Chair Criminal Justice & Public Safety  
Subcommittee  
Judiciary Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Spencer Roach, Vice Chair Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee  
Judiciary Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Michael Grieco, Ranking Member Criminal Justice & Public Safety  
Subcommittee  
Judiciary Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Webster Barnaby, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee Judiciary  
Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Mike Beltran, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee, Judiciary  
Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Demi Busatta Cabrera, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee  
Judiciary Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable James Bush III, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee, Judiciary  
Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Joseph Casello, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee Judiciary  
Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Kevin Chambliss, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee Judiciary  
Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Elizabeth Fetterhoff, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee Judiciary  
Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Tommy Gregory, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee  
Judiciary Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Brett Thomas Hage, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee Judiciary  
Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Andrew Learned, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee Judiciary  
Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Patt Maney, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee Judiciary  
Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Alex Rizo, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee Judiciary  
Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable John Snyder, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee Judiciary  
Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
The Honorable Geraldine Thompson, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee  
Judiciary Committee, Florida House of Representatives





The Honorable Kaylee Tuck, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee Judiciary Committee, Florida House of Representatives  
Whitney Hall, Policy Chief, Criminal Justice & Public Safety Subcommittee Judiciary Committee, Florida House of Representatives

Dear Members of the Florida Legislature,

We are writing to express our support for the Debt-Free Justice for Children Act (“DFJCA” – SB 428 and HB 257) and ask that you schedule hearings to move the DFJCA ultimately forward to passage.

[CEO Action for Racial Equity](#) is a Fellowship of over 100 companies that mobilizes a community of business leaders with diverse expertise across multiple industries and geographies to advance public policy in four key areas — healthcare, education, economic empowerment and public safety. Our mission is to identify, develop and promote scalable and sustainable public policies and corporate engagement strategies that will address systemic racism, social injustice and improve societal well-being for the 47+million Black Americans in the United States.

We applaud Florida’s leading practice, the Developmental Approach [1] to the juvenile justice system. This approach focuses on rehabilitation, including programs that are designed to help children overcome past mistakes and build a better future for themselves and the communities in which they live. Unfortunately, juvenile court fees have a negative impact on that future by 1) disadvantaging those most economically fragile and 2) creating obstacles to rehabilitation. Passing the DFJCA will further advance Florida’s juvenile justice leadership by eliminating much of Florida’s juvenile fees thereby providing impacted children a better chance of long-term and sustained success.

The DFJCA aligns with our mission and one of our policy solutions to decriminalize poverty. Juvenile court fee policies are a key issue in the decriminalizing poverty space as these payment-for-use policies disproportionately impact low-income communities and communities of color. As we identify policies, such as these, that help address the decriminalization of poverty, we are guided by a set of nonpartisan principles:

- The inability to pay fines and fees should never be the reason for added punishment.
- The justice system should not disproportionately harm the poor.
- All individuals deserve to be treated justly without bias or prejudice by our legal and law enforcement systems.

The principles outlined above unite us in supporting the passage of the DFJCA and will serve as a meaningful way to generate greater equity in Florida’s juvenile justice system.

As evidenced by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice’s “Florida Race Equity Challenge” [2], racial equity is a concern in Florida’s juvenile justice system. Data supports that



juvenile court fees have a disparate impact on Black youths, negatively impacts communities, and such fees are most often not collectible. Even when collected, they are done so at a high cost to both the state in terms of cost to collect, and to the families who must sacrifice necessities to pay their debt. Specifically, data which supports the premise of disparate impact includes:

- Black youth in Florida are over-represented at nearly every decisioning stage of the juvenile justice system resulting in children and their parents being responsible for a disproportionate share of Florida court fees with – most often – no way to pay them. As one example of over-representation, Black youth are only 21% of Florida's population, but represent over 50% of the youths arrested.[\[3\]](#)
- Juvenile fees also have a greater financial impact on Black youth and their families due to the difference in median income. In Florida, Black Americans' median income was 70% that of white Americans (\$45,331 vs \$64,978)[\[4\]](#) resulting in a greater negative impact to the Black family's standard of living for the same juvenile infractions.

As a coalition of businesses, we have seen how the cycle of poverty impacts our workforce, our customers, and our communities. In addition, the U.S. is facing a **shortage of talent in our highest growing sectors** (e.g., healthcare, technology, transportation). Combined with population growth of less than 1% every year and demographic changes, the U.S. economy will only grow by training and retraining more people. According to a McKinsey & Company study, the **largest pools of undertrained workers are found in communities of color.** [\[5\]](#)

The juvenile court fee policies in Florida have a detrimental impact on a youth's ability to work because:

- The policy of driver's license suspension for failure to pay prevents them from any job that requires a license and reduces their ability to obtain employment
- The inability to have their record expunged creates limits on the jobs for which they can apply
- The policy of converting unpaid fees to a civil lien when they become adults further impacts their ability to obtain a job and creates a situation where they can be arrested, further limiting their ability to work

Florida has the opportunity to change policies that have created a cycle of debt and stress for families who are already struggling financially. Our justice system policies should give our children a better chance of success in life, not bring punishment that, for many, lasts decades.

CEO Action for Racial Equity is committed to working with lawmakers across the aisle to enact policies that bring equity, transparency, and accountability to our justice system.

We urge you to pass these bills.

Thank you for your leadership.

Sincerely,





CEO Action for Racial Equity

CC:

Hon. Chris Sprowls

Hon. Wilton Simpson

Hon. Bryan Avila

Hon. Michael Grant

Hon. Lauren Book

Hon. Evan Jenne

Hon. Vance Arthur Aloupis, Jr.

Hon. Nicholas X. Duran

Hon. Christopher Benjamin

Hon. Fentrice Driskell

Hon. Anna V. Eskamani

Hon. Christine Hunschofsky

Hon. Erin Grall

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## Citations

[1] [Juvenile Justice Geography, Policy, Practice & Statistics](#), Purpose Clauses, 2016

[2] [Florida Race Equity Challenge](#), Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

[3] [Disproportionate Minority Contact/Racial Ethnic Disparity Benchmark Report FY 2017-18](#), Florida Department of Juvenile Justice,

[4] [Average Household Income by Race/Ethnicity](#), Miami Matters

[5] [The Case for Inclusive Growth](#) McKinsey & Company, April 2021



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