

Support Letter Guide and Templates

We created this guide as part of a series of resources to support community advocates in building state and local campaigns to abolish youth fees and fines by sharing strategies from Debt Free Justice (DFJ) campaigns. See more resources at debtfreejustice.org/resources.

This is a guide to drafting and gathering support letters for a bill that includes [guidelines](#), a [checklist](#), and [templates](#) for support and sign-on letters. You and your partner organizations might write support letters or you all might be gathering support letters or sign-ons from other organizations. If you have questions about this resource, write to info@debtfreejustice.org.

Background & Guidelines

What is a Letter of Support?

- Support letters express a position on a bill and why the authoring person, organization, or group wants to see it become law. The letters call on the recipient, usually legislators or the governor, to support the bill and vote “aye” (or sign it, if writing to the governor).
- Depending on the audience, support letters can reflect the views of specific professional, ideological, or community groups (ex: defense attorneys, religious communities, youth and families, judges, educators, law enforcement, etc.).

Where Can I See Examples of Support Letters from Other DFJ Campaigns?

- Browse debtfreejustice.org/resources to see examples of support letters used in past DFJ campaigns.

Who Receives the Support Letter?

- Support letters can be provided to any audience at any time (e.g. can be sent to individual target senators, a committee, every member in a legislative house, etc.). Support letters don’t have to be in connection with a hearing, though sending them when a bill is being heard can be strategic.
- Support letters are particularly useful when used as a call-to-action for legislators who are due to take immediate action (e.g., file/co-sponsor/amend a bill, schedule a hearing, cast a vote, etc.). For example, a legislator concerned about tough-on-crime opposition might be persuaded by a letter of support from law enforcement professionals who agree with your proposed bill.

Who Writes Letters of Support?

- Letters of support for youth fee and fine elimination bills are often written by local organizations working on the campaign, other local stakeholders, and national policy advocates.
- Note that other stakeholders, such as county or state agencies or departments may submit letters of opposition to the bill (e.g. DAs). It may be important to gather letters of support if you anticipate opposition letters will be submitted.

How Should a Support Letter Be Formatted?

- Keep the formatting simple and formal, use a letterhead, and send the letter as a PDF attachment (as opposed to the body of an email). Letters should not exceed one page in length.

- Put the strongest arguments first (closer to the top of the page or beginning of the paragraph), and consider bolding, underlining, or italicizing the most important phrases/information.
- If citing data, focus on the main conclusion instead of reciting numbers. Use endnotes for citations to any relevant materials you refer to in the letter.
- Use letterhead for individual letters and include logos for each org in sign-on letters. Even at a glance, a series of organizational logos can add legitimacy and show the campaign's momentum.

Checklist: Prepare to Gather Support Letters or Signatures

- Consider your options:** There are two categories of support letters: 1) an individual letter of support from a single organization or person and 2) a support letter with signatures (sign-ons) from multiple organizations or people. Signing onto a letter is an easier lift that could make more sense for certain groups.
- Check deadlines and procedures:** Check with a lobbyist or your bill sponsor's office about any formal deadlines or procedures for how support letters should be submitted. You may also be able to find information online.
- Identify the audience:** Work with your coalition, lobbyist, or bill sponsor's office to understand who your audience is and what arguments or stakeholders/organizations would be most persuasive to them.
- Identify key supporters:** Work with your coalition, lobbyist, and bill sponsor to create a list of key organizations or stakeholders.
 - Consider the importance of having letters from conservative groups: These can show strong bipartisan support for the issue and neutralize knee-jerk opposition based on assumed party-line ideological positions.
 - Consider whether support letters from national organizations will help or hurt your strategy: In some places where politics are hyper-local, support from well-known regional or national orgs (e.g., ACLU) can raise the profile of the bill and bring more opposition.
 - Youth fee and fine abolition has garnered support from conservative groups, national criminal justice and racial justice groups, law enforcement associations (prosecutors, probation chiefs, etc.), and judges. The DFJ website shows [key organizations that support ending fees and fines for youth](#). See also [ALEC's 2023 model youth fee repeal bill](#).
- Prepare your drafts or templates:** Work with your coalition, lobbyist, and bill sponsor to brainstorm key points. Draft the support letter for sign-ons. Offer a template when asking for individual support letters. See the [templates](#) below.
- Begin outreach early:** Coordinate with your coalition on who will reach out to which organizations or stakeholders. Consider sharing a fact sheet or talking points and offer to answer any questions. Give folks enough time to review the materials, ask questions, and draft a letter before the bill's first committee hearing or whenever it will be needed.
- Plan for uncertain timing:** Often you won't know until ~2 weeks in advance (or less) when your bill will be heard in committee, and sometimes things change last minute. Be clear that folks

should have support letters ready to be submitted on short notice. Prepare as much as you can beforehand so that only minimal changes are needed once you have the official hearing notice.

Determine your ask and communicate it upfront:

- Decide whether you're asking for individual support letters, asking for signatures, or giving folks the option to do either.
- Consider whether, as part of your bill strategy, you'd like to have support letters submitted once or multiple times, ex: once for the House committee and once for the Senate committee (could be more than that if you want letters for multiple committees, floor votes, and for the governor). If so, communicate that ask early on and clearly.
- Make deadlines clear. Consider asking folks to email you a copy of their support letter so you can ensure that it is properly filed with the committee, legislators, or governor.

Individual Organization Support Letter Template

[DATE]

[RECIPIENT: either committee chair or committee name]

[RECIPIENT TITLE, if addressed to committee chair]

[RECIPIENT ADDRESS]

RE: [SUBJECT - ex: Support for HB 123 (Bill Sponsor's Name) – Ending Youth Fees and Fines in STATE]

Dear [Either address the committee leadership: “Chair Smith, Vice Chair Johnson, and Members of the Committee” or address each committee member: “Senators Ballinger, Garner, Hendren, and Johnson”],

On behalf of [ORGANIZATION] and our supporters across [STATE, COUNTY, REGION], [I/we] urge you and your colleagues to support and approve [BILL NUMBER], to end the assessment of fees and fines to youth and families in [STATE].

[3-4 short paragraphs describing the rationale for support. Examples:

- *Describe fees and fines authorized:* [STATE] law authorizes, and often requires, courts to assess administrative fees in juvenile delinquency cases. Courts charge fees to youth and their families at every stage of their involvement in the juvenile legal system: fees are charged for diversion, legal representation, detention, probation, counseling, and more. These fees range from \$20 to hundreds of dollars each, which can quickly add up to thousands of dollars for one case.
- *Public safety argument:* Instead of putting public safety first, fees and fines create an excessive burden that contributes to people falling into a cycle of debt and often crime.
- *Refer to supporting research:* Thousands of young [STATE RESIDENTS] and their families are currently charged a wide range of administrative fees by courts, state agencies, and local entities. Research shows that youth fees and fines undermine the financial and psychological well-being of youth and their families. Given that, predictably, many of these families cannot afford the financial burden, harsh penalties for failure to pay youth fees and fines lead to debt that only makes it harder for them to make ends meet and improve their circumstances.
- *Highlight perverse incentive:* It is dangerous to have the juvenile legal system view citizens as revenue opportunities. This creates a twisted incentive to keep people entangled in the system and funding it. In the case of [STATE]'s youth fees, the bottom line does not even make sense.
- *Describe inefficiency:* Youth fees generate little or no net revenue for counties, courts, or the state. Across the board, revenue is declining while collection costs are substantial and increasing over time. In some cases, because families cannot afford to pay, collection costs exceed revenue.
- *Highlight disparities:* Imposing fees and fines on youth and families represents injustice by geography and disproportionately impacts low-income families of color.
- *Describe the bill:* [BILL NUMBER] will remove these barriers to youth success. It will eliminate fees and fines charged to youth and their families in the juvenile delinquency system, and end collection of previously assessed fees. This bill will also discharge debt and remove obstacles to juvenile record destruction, essential changes for enabling a young person to re-enter the [STATE] community on the right path. Eliminating fees and fines will have minimal fiscal impact on courts but provide significant relief to struggling families.

- *Highlight the stakeholder or organization's motivation:* As a juvenile defender, I am deeply committed to the success of [STATE]'s youth. Youth fees and fines do not promote public safety, and research shows that they place dire financial strain on families, are racially discriminatory, and undermine youth potential.

For these reasons, [ORGANIZATION] urges you and your colleagues to vote yes on [BILL NUMBER].

Sincerely,

[NAME], [TITLE]
[ORGANIZATION]

Bipartisan Support Letter Template - Multiple Organization Sign-on

[DATE]

[RECIPIENT: either committee chair or committee name]

[RECIPIENT TITLE, if addressed to committee chair]

[RECIPIENT ADDRESS]

RE: [SUBJECT - ex: Support for [BILL SPONSOR] – Ending Youth Fees in STATE]

Dear [Either address the committee leadership: “Chair Smith, Vice Chair Johnson, and Members of the Committee” or address each committee member: “Senators Ballinger, Garner, Hendren, and Johnson”],

We write as organizations across the political spectrum to urge you to **support [BILL (Sponsor)]** to end the assessment and collection of youth fees in [STATE].

Youth fees – monetary sanctions imposed on youth and families to generate government revenue – are a regressive tax on vulnerable [STATE RESIDENTS]. These fees include charges for diversionary programs, probation supervision, parent training programs, miscellaneous court costs, and more, and come with harsh penalties and other negative consequences for nonpayment.

Studies show that youth fees create additional barriers for youth and families, often trapping them in cycles of debt and court involvement. Further, youth fees are linked to higher recidivism rates and lower levels of positive social spending, undermining community safety and youth rehabilitation.

Research consistently shows that jurisdictions tend to generate little to no net revenue from youth fees, which they collect at low rates with high costs. Still, relying on system-involved youth and families to generate potential government revenue creates a perverse incentive to entangle youth in the system. By ending youth fees that only push youth deeper into the system, [STATE] could see long-term fiscal savings.

Ending youth fees is a common-sense juvenile legal system reform with bipartisan support in [STATE] and nationally. **We respectfully urge you to vote AYE on [BILL].**

Sincerely,

[NAME], [TITLE]
[ORGANIZATION]

[NAME], [TITLE]
[ORGANIZATION]

[NAME], [TITLE]
[ORGANIZATION]