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PRIVATIZATION OF TIME PAYMENT MANAGEMENT: IMPLEMENTATION TO RESULTING IMPACTS

Privatization of court time-payment management is the focus of this research project. Courts need to keep pace with their increasingly complex workload but are faced with doing so in a static or inflation only adjusted budget environment. Creative methods will need to be explored to make necessary changes and adapt to new challenges.

An evaluation of resources devoted to time payment management within Okanogan County District Court, Okanogan, Washington was examined through time studies. In addition, the response from defendants at this court was tracked following the inception of a private time payment management contract. Each account identified for referral to this service was tracked over a ninety-day period for defendant responses.

Two other courts in Washington, Kitsap County District Court and Pierce County District Court No. 2, have contracted for time payment management service. The defendant payment patterns prior to and following the privatization at these two courts were sampled and compared. The discretion on what noncompliance action should be taken upon payment default remained with each of the three courts.

The research methodology used for the Okanogan County District Court time studies was to time each payment management task. The estimated staff times were then used to calculate an estimated cost to the court for managing monthly payments.

Committed infractions and guilty finding cases at Kitsap and Pierce Counties were evaluated individually for defendant payment response rates in 1997 and then in 1999.

Privatization of the time payment administrative function saves the court money and allows staff to be redirecting to other tasks. The total monthly account management cost for Okanogan County was estimated to be \$2,244.80, which involved 85.3 staff hours and 1.5 hours of judge time.

The case samples taken at the other two courts showed a difference in the response rate from defendants on their payments. The average number of days taken to pay a committed infraction case in full improved 45% (39 days) at Pierce County. Kitsap County's average number of days to pay also improved by 49% (60 days). Guilty finding cases saw a marked improvement in the time taken to pay a case off, a 59% (173 days) improvement at Pierce County and a 46% (118 days) improvement at Kitsap County.

The findings show that there is definite improvement in the speed with which defendants pay their court ordered obligations when presented with paying a monthly service fee and interest. At the same time, the unfortunate occurrence that followed with the guilty cases was the decline in total number of cases paid in full. Pierce County had a 16% reduction in the number of cases on average that paid off between 1997 and 1999 and Kitsap County had a 23% reduction.

Privatization of payments appears to lend itself well to civil infraction cases. The infraction cases were paid in full fairly consistently both before the contract and following privatization. Guilty criminal cases appear to have a better overall response rate when the court manages them internally. Even though a sharp reduction in the time required to pay was achieved that is secondary to court credibility and maintaining higher compliance rates.

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