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## City Collects Additional \$1 Million in Court Fines After Revamping Program to Collect

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**CITY COLLECTS ADDITIONAL \$1 MILLION IN COURT FINES  
AFTER REVAMPING PROGRAM TO COLLECT**

DAYTON, Ohio — There's a secret to getting people to pay their court fines. Embarrass them.

If that doesn't work, tell their mothers.

Intimidation, although it's the method most favored by most cops, doesn't work as well as either of those two methods, according to Dayton courts operation manager John Gilson and University of Dayton communication professor Steven Blatt.

The pair will lead a "Compliance and Collection" workshop for about 20 court administrators and clerks of court Feb. 24 and 25 as a University of Dayton continuing education program. They'll teach others how to accomplish what Dayton has — \$1 million in additional fines collected in the first five years of a revamped collection program.

Their program is based, in part, on a communication research study by Blatt that showed the right tactics on the telephone can influence people to pay their fines.

"We wanted to gain compliance without enforcement," says Gilson, a 1970 criminal justice graduate of UD. "Police departments are notoriously bad about helping courts to collect fines because it's just not a priority for them. They have better things to do than go out to look for a guy who may owe the city \$79 for public intoxication."

Gilson set up a two-person warrant enforcement unit as a pilot project in 1992 as part of the municipal court system. One of the most effective tools to encourage people to pay their fines turned out to be big, bright orange warning notices that they delivered and displayed at work places and on front doors. The placards were personalized messages to offenders that they would be arrested within 24 hours if they didn't pay their fines.

"Everyone in the building would know that we had a warrant for John Doe's arrest," Gilson said. "And the word gets around. If one worker in a factory starts telling people, 'I didn't pay my fine and nothing happened,' you could end up with 50 or 60 people in that factory not paying fines. So we would paper the neighborhood or work place with our big orange notices."

Such "public visibility" worked wonders, according to Gilson. Although the unit was only required to bring in enough money to pay its own \$83,000-per-year costs, the first-year results showed \$142,228 in fines paid and the equivalent of \$28,000 in community work

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provided in lieu of fines.

But Gilson knew that sending marshals in person to deliver the notices was time consuming and labor intensive, and he speculated about further improving results with telephone warnings. "We wanted to maximize the effect of phone calls," Gilson said. "When the court issues 12,000 warrants a year, you know two or three officers won't get to them all."

So in 1994, Blatt organized a group of undergraduate students from UD to make calls from the warrant enforcement office to the study's target group — people who had failed to pay their court-imposed fines for crimes that ranged from domestic violence and assault to jaywalking. Each had already been sent two letters warning that a warrant had been issued for their arrest because they hadn't paid the fines.

"We looked at persuasive communication techniques and came up with 15 strategies, or scripts, to gain compliance," Blatt says. As they used the different messages, the students ranked how well each worked.

When they reached the person with the warrant (20 percent of the calls), an ingratiating message worked best. When the callers told the offenders, "I don't mean to bother you, but I am calling to remind you that you have an outstanding fine," 35 percent responded by paying.

When callers calmly but politely listed the alternatives that would get the client off the warrant arrest list — pay in full, pay \$50 and work out a payment plan for the rest, or see a judge to work out a plan that could include community service — 17 percent of the offenders complied.

The rest of the time, the callers reached someone other than the person with the warrant.

"Moms are the best people in the world" for getting family members to pay their fines, Gilson said. When they reached a parent, girlfriend or someone else in the household, the callers had the best success using rational approaches. "If you don't encourage them to see a judge or pay this fine, the consequences for them will be jail," the callers said, and 50 percent of the fines were paid.

After the proven communication strategies were put in place, the program exceeded its \$92,000 goal for the first year and pulled in \$170,000 in fines.

About 40 percent of people ignored their fines prior to the changes instituted in Dayton, but Gilson's goal wasn't to see them arrested. He wanted them to comply, and the rate of those who fail to pay has fallen to 25 percent.

"It's all about the courts increasing revenue while maintaining the quality of justice," Gilson says.