

Amnesty program offers motorists a break All 10 Wayne County District Courts take part in campaign

By John Minnis

Legal News

Nearly half a million motorists in Detroit alone have an opportunity to settle their delinquent traffic tickets at half the cost under a new amnesty program beginning April 1 -- and they'd be fools not to take advantage of it.

That was the message Wednesday from judges and administrators of the 10 Wayne County District Courts taking part in the 2009 Traffic Ticket Amnesty Program April 1 through April 30.

"It provides an opportunity for citizens to take care of their traffic tickets, get their licenses back and generate revenue for Detroit," said 36th District Court Administrator Otis Davis.

He said there are more than 450,000 delinquent tickets out of the 36th District Court alone.

The last time the 36th District Court offered an amnesty program was in 2002. At that time, the court collected \$3 million in outstanding fines and netted \$1 million for the city. Prior to 2002, the last amnesty program was in 1993.

Chief Judge Marilyn Atkins of the 36th District Court said her court tries to offer the amnesty program every 10 years, "but because of the economy, we decided to do it this year."

As with a General Motors buyout, Atkins said this offer will not be extended.

"We're going to work with you, but you have to come in and see us during April," she said, "because after that, we will come after you with the full force of the law."

Atkins's court is offering a 50 percent reduction on the city fine, the state and ordinance late fees, the D36 cost and the late penalty on all civil infraction tickets. The tickets must be in default status or had a judgment from Jan. 1, 2002, through Dec. 31, 2008. Parking tickets are not included in the 36th District Court program.

Nine other district courts are participating. They are 17th District Court, Redford; 18th District Court, Westland; 21st District Court, Garden City; 24th District Court, Allen Park and Melvindale; 28th District Court, Southgate; 29th District Court, Wayne; 31st District Court, Hamtramck; Grosse Pointe Park Municipal Court; and 33rd District Court, Woodhaven.

The amnesty program varies among the courts. In Grosse Pointe Park, parking tickets are included, according to court administrator Karen Albrecht.

"In 2002, we got a lot of calls asking why we weren't taking part in the program," Albrecht

explained. She said only Grosse Pointe Park among the five Grosse Pointe communities was taking part in the amnesty program.

Judge Richard Hammer of the 21st District Court in Garden City encouraged individuals with outstanding tickets to call their respective courts to get the details of their participation in the program.

"We are fairly certain a great number of people are good, honest citizens who cannot get out from under their tickets," he said.

Judge John T. Courtright of the 24th District Court in Allen Park and Melvindale concurred. "I would encourage all the citizens to take advantage of the program," he said.

Payable parking tickets are included in the 24th District Court's amnesty offer.

Parking tickets are also reduced in Wayne, Woodhaven, Allen Park, Melvindale and Redford.

Judge Atkins in Detroit said her court does not have authority to reduce parking tickets.

Judge Hammer said violators do not have to be residents of the city in which their tickets were issued in order to take advantage of the amnesty program.

"Anyone coming to the same court will get the same treatment," he said.

In some cases, the savings to motorists could be substantial. In Westland, for example, the 18th District Court will waive the \$35 default late fee, the \$50 warrant cost and the 20 percent late fee on eligible cases.

In all courts, however, individuals who have had their licenses suspended must pay the \$45 clearance fee to the State of Michigan. And in most, if not all, cases, adjusted fines must be paid in full. In most courts, credit cards, certified checks and money orders are accepted.

"While some other jurisdictions may be giving payment plans, this court is not," Atkins said of the 36th District Court. "This is a one-shot deal. Bring your money in before April 30."

Individuals who appear at their court to address violations covered under the program will not be arrested upon their voluntary appearance.

The judges and court administrators agreed that sometimes people get buried by fines and cannot climb their way out, especially under the current economic conditions.

"We find for some people their fines and fees just keep getting added on and on, and a person cannot pay a ticket even though they might have been able to otherwise," said Judge Courtright of Allen Park.

Motorists may call (313) 967-7400 or visit www.36thdistrictcourt.org for more detailed information regarding each court participating in the amnesty program.