

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.acluohio.org/en/news/hope-rising-life-after-debtors-prison>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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Do you remember [Jack Dawley](#) the man who spent weeks in jail and lost his job because of debtors prison?

I first met Jack Dawley in August 2012 at a coffee house in Norwalk, Ohio. Life was not very good for Jack at the time. He was arrested in May 2012 for failing to pay his criminal fines from the mid-90s. He had fallen behind on payments only because back injuries had prevented him from continuing to work in construction. After months of searching, he finally found a retail job that would not further damage his back. As he was driving to pick up his first paycheck, a police officer scanned his license plate and arrested him for failing to pay his fines.

After his arrest, he spent ten days in jail.

Jack lost his job.

He lost his apartment.

And he lost his drivers license.

On top of all that, he faced ten more days in jail if he missed a single payment over the next three months. Homeless, unemployed, and penniless, Jack was at the end of his rope.

I remember asking Jack the first time we met why he contacted the ACLU. He said he didnt know much about us, but a family friend saw a news article about our organization and thought we might be able to help. He later told me that he never really expected to hear anything from us, but he just wanted to tell his story to someone.

Jacks decision to speak out and tell his story began a ripple effect. In the months after our meeting, the ACLU began to investigate the unfair and unconstitutional debtors prison practices that were rampant in Norwalk. We found other people, [like Megan](#), who had been through the same thing. In fact, in just six months, over 250 people in this small community had been sent to jail for being too poor to pay their criminal fines.

In April 2013, we issued [The Outskirts of Hope](#), a new report telling the stories of those who had been wrongfully jailed, including Jack. The response was immense, with courts altering their policies and the Ohio Supreme Court instituting training for judges to prevent debtors prison from occurring.

But what happened to Jack? I spoke to him a few days ago, and he happily reported to me that he had finally found employment at a factory. He has used his wages to pay off nearly all of his criminal fines. Jack has also saved enough money to reinstate his drivers license. Although he is still living on a friends couch, Jack is saving for an apartment and hopes to have his own place to live soon.

The biggest difference I noticed in Jack was his voice. In August 2012, he sounded like a man beaten down and without much hope. A victim of debtors prison, he was afraid that he would be right back in jail in another three months. Today, Jack is full of optimism for the future. Without the constant threat of jail time, life has possibilities. Jack is no longer a victim of debtors prison, and by speaking out about his experiences, he has ensured that many other people in Ohio will not become victims in the future. I wish we all had some of Jacks courage.

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