

Testimony of Julissa Molina Soto

for

“A Fine Scheme: How Court-Imposed Fees and Fines Unjustly  
Burden Vulnerable Communities”

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME, TERRORISM, AND HOMELAND  
SECURITY

Tuesday, July 27, 2021

Good morning Chairwoman Jackson Lee, Ranking Member Biggs, Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member Jordan, and members of the Subcommittee.

*Mi nombre es Julissa Molina Soto. Como inmigrante, el inglés no es mi primer idioma, así que por favor tengan paciencia conmigo.*

My name is Julissa Molina Soto. As an immigrant, English is not my first language, so please bear with me.

I am grateful for the opportunity to tell my story to people in a position to help millions of families like mine across the country.

I am a naturalized U.S. citizen, and I live in Aurora, Colorado, just outside of Denver. I am the proud parent of Julianna and Juan, who are now adults.

I raised my kids as a single parent. It was hard, but like most immigrant families, we were very close-knit.

We managed OK until *mi hijo*, my son, got caught up in the juvenile justice system and we faced an avalanche of fees and fines.

Juan was 14 when police arrested him for stealing toothpaste from King Sooper, our local supermarket. He took the toothpaste because he thought we didn't have enough money to buy it, but it was wrong, and I felt ashamed.

I also had no idea what his mistake would cost us.

First, Juan was fined hundreds of dollars for shoplifting one tube of toothpaste.

Second, he had to pay money to the store, much more than the cost of the toothpaste.

Finally, he had to pay administrative fees to the court, including \$60 each week for a class about the consequences of stealing.

Juan didn't have a lawyer – they said we would have to pay a fee just to apply for a free public defender – so I tried to help him myself.

But the language barrier made it very hard. I didn't understand why he was being punished so harshly, and my 14-year-old had to try to explain everything to me in court.

Of course, Juan also did not have any money. He was a child, so I was expected to pay everything.

I was making \$19,000 a year working at McDonald's, and we didn't have extra money for anything. To pay the court, sometimes I was late on rent or sacrificed other things like groceries or doctor's visits for my children.

Because of the financial difficulty, I took a second job. I left the house every day at 5:00 am, and sometimes I didn't get home until after dinner or the kids were in bed. The second job to pay the court fees made things much worse for family.

About a year later, when Juan was 15, he was arrested two times with small amounts of marijuana. I was surprised, but maybe I shouldn't have been because I rarely saw him or his sister.

This time, the court fees and classes were even more expensive. We had to take classes on effective communication every week, which cost \$75 each time. If we were not able to attend a class because we couldn't afford the fee, they charged us another fee for missing the class.

All told, I was charged almost \$8,000. Even when I made payments, sometimes the total amount I owed increased because of late fees. I begged the court for a waiver, and I even offered to clean the courthouse or do other community service.

I felt like I was being punished just because I was too poor to pay the fees.

After several years of working two jobs, I finally paid off everything. But the cost to my family was terrible. We were trapped by the fees. I couldn't be the mother I wanted to be, and my son still resents me for not being around enough when he needed me.

I don't blame the system for Juan's mistake, but I blame the fees for making it much worse. The fees made all of us feel like the system was unjust.

I'm happy to say that just last month my state abolished all fees in the juvenile system and will waive \$58 million for thousands of Colorado families. But most states still charge these regressive and racially discriminatory fees to youth and families in the legal system.

Juan joined the U.S. Army after high school and served two tours of duty in Afghanistan. He continues to serve in the Army Reserves, and he has a daughter of his own. He works very hard to be there for my granddaughter. Nevertheless, my son still struggles because of the financial hardship imposed on our family.

My son went to fight for his country twice in Afghanistan, and he is a good dad. It's our turn to fight for kids and families by ending these harmful fees and fines.

Thank you for listening to me today. I am happy to answer your questions.