

FILED
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Court of Appeals
Division III
State of Washington

No. 32356-1-III
IN THE COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE STATE OF WASHINGTON
DIVISION III

STATE OF WASHINGTON,

Plaintiff/Respondent,

vs.

ADRIAN MUNOZ-RIVERA,

Defendant/Appellant.

APPEAL FROM THE FRANKLIN COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT
Honorable Vic L. VanderSchoor, Judge,

REPLY BRIEF OF APPELLANT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

A. RESTATEMENT OF APPELLANT’S ISSUE 5.....1

B. RESPONDENT’S ANSWER TO APPELLANT’S ISSUE 5.....1

C. ARGUMENT IN REPLY TO STATE’S RESPONSE.....1

 5. Since the directive to pay LFOs was based on an unsupported finding of ability to pay, the matter should be remanded for the sentencing court to make individualized inquiry into the defendant's current and future ability to pay before imposing LFOs.....1

 a. This court should exercise its discretion and accept review.....1

 b. Substantive argument.....4

D. CONCLUSION.....9

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

<u>Cases</u>	<u>Page</u>
<i>Bearden v. Georgia</i> , 461 U.S. 660, 103 S.Ct. 2064, 76 L.Ed.2d 221 (1983).....	5
<i>Fuller v. Oregon</i> , 417 U.S. 40, 94 S.Ct. 2116, 40 L.Ed.2d 642 (1974).....	4, 5
<i>Bellevue John Does 1-11 v. Bellevue Sch. Dist. #405</i> , 129 Wn. App. 832, 120 P.3d 616 (2005) rev'd in part sub nom. <i>Bellevue John Does 1-11 v.</i> <i>Bellevue Sch. Dist. #405</i> , 164 Wn.2d 199, 189 P.3d 139 (2008).....	3
<i>Kitsap Alliance of Prop. Owners v. Cent. Puget Sound Growth Mgmt.</i> <i>Hearings Bd.</i> , 160 Wn. App. 250, 255 P.3d 696, 701 (2011).....	3
<i>Nordstrom Credit, Inc. v. Dep't of Revenue</i> , 120 Wn.2d 935, 845 P.2d 1331 (1993).....	7
<i>State v. Baldwin</i> , 63 Wn. App. 303, 818 P.2d 1116, 837 P.2d 646 (1991).....	7, 8
<i>State v. Bertrand</i> , 165 Wn. App. 393, 267 P.3d 511 (2011).....	7, 8
<i>State v. Blazina</i> , ___ Wn.2d ___, 344 P.3d 680 (March 12, 2015).....	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9
<i>State v. Brockob</i> , 159 Wn.2d 311, 150 P.3d 59 (2006).....	7
<i>State v. Curry</i> , 118 Wn.2d 911, 829 P.2d 166 (1992).....	4, 6, 7

Statutes

U.S. CONST. amend. XIV.....	5
..	
CONST, art. 1 sec. 12.....	5
RCW 9.94A.760(1).....	5
RCW 9.94A.760(2).....	4
RCW 10.01.160.....	6
RCW 10.01.160(1).....	5
RCW 10.01.160(2).....	5
RCW 10.01.160(3).....	3, 4, 5

Court Rules

GR 34.....	6
comment to GR 34.....	6
RAP 2.5(a).....	2

A. RESTATEMENT OF APPELLANT’S ISSUE 5

5. Since the directive to pay LFOs was based on an unsupported finding of ability to pay, the matter should be remanded for the sentencing court to make individualized inquiry into the defendant's current and future ability to pay before imposing LFOs.

B. RESPONDENT’S ANSWER TO APPELLANT’S ISSUE 5

5. The appellant may not raise a challenge to legal financial obligations for the first time on appeal and in any event the record contains sufficient information to establish the appellant has the ability to pay his legal financial obligations.

C. ARGUMENT IN REPLY TO STATE’S RESPONSE

Mr. Munoz-Rivera primarily upon his Brief of Appellant to address all issues raised by the State. He also argues as follows in direct reply to the State’s response.

5. Since the directive to pay LFOs was based on an unsupported finding of ability to pay, the matter should be remanded for the sentencing court to make individualized inquiry into the defendant's current and future ability to pay before imposing LFOs.

a. *This court should exercise its discretion and accept review.*

Mr. Munoz-Rivera did not object below. However, the Washington Supreme Court has held the ability to pay legal financial LFOs may be raised for the first time on appeal by discretionary review. *Blazina*, ___Wn.2d___, 344 P.3d at 683. In *Blazina* the Court felt compelled to

accept review under RAP 2.5(a) because “[n]ational and local cries for reform of broken LFO systems demand ... reach[ing] the merits” *Blazina*, 344 P.3d at 683. The Court reviewed the pervasive nature of trial courts’ failures to consider each defendant’s ability to pay in conjunction with the unfair disparities and penalties that indigent defendants experience based upon this failure.

Public policy favors direct review by this Court. Indigent defendants who are saddled with wrongly imposed LFOs have many “reentry difficulties” that ultimately work against the State’s interest in accomplishing rehabilitation and reducing recidivism. *Blazina*, 344 P.3d at 684. Availability of a statutory remission process down the road does little to alleviate the harsh realities incurred by virtue of LFOs that are improperly imposed at the outset. As the *Blazina* Court bluntly recognized, one societal reality is “the state cannot collect money from defendants who cannot pay.” *Blazina*, 344 P.3d at 684. Requiring defendants who never had the ability to pay LFOs to go through collections and a remission process to correct a sentencing error that could have been corrected on direct appeal is a financially wasteful use of administrative and judicial process. A more efficient use of state resources would result from this court’s remand back to the sentencing judge who is already familiar

with the case to make the ability to pay inquiry.

As a final matter of public policy, this Court has the immediate opportunity to expedite reform of the broken LFO system. This Court should embrace its obligation to uphold and enforce the Washington Supreme Court’s decision that RCW 10.01.160(3) requires the sentencing judge to make an individualized inquiry on the record into the defendant’s current and future ability to pay before the court imposes LFOs. *Blazina*, 344 P.3d at 685; see also *Bellevue John Does 1-11 v. Bellevue Sch. Dist. #405*, 129 Wn. App. 832, 867-68, 120 P.3d 616, 634 (2005) rev'd in part sub nom. *Bellevue John Does 1-11 v. Bellevue Sch. Dist. #405*, 164 Wn.2d 199, 189 P.3d 139 (2008) (The principle of stare decisis—“to stand by the thing decided”—binds the appellate court as well as the trial court to follow Supreme Court decisions).

This requirement applies to the sentencing court in Mr. Munoz-Rivera’s case regardless of his failure to object. See *Kitsap Alliance of Prop. Owners v. Cent. Puget Sound Growth Mgmt. Hearings Bd.*, 160 Wn. App. 250, 259–60, 255 P.3d 696, 701 (2011) (“Once the Washington Supreme Court has authoritatively construed a statute, the legislation is considered to have always meant that interpretation.”) (citations omitted).

The sentencing court's signature on a judgment and sentence with boilerplate language stating that it engaged in the required inquiry is wholly inadequate to meet the requirement. *Blazina*, 344 P.3d at 685. Post-*Blazina*, one would expect future trial courts to make the appropriate ability to pay inquiry on the record or defense attorneys to object in order to preserve the error for direct review. Mr. Munoz-Rivera respectfully submits that in order to ensure he and all indigent defendants are treated as the LFO statute requires, this Court should reach the unpreserved error and accept review. *Blazina*, 344 P.3d at 687 (FAIRHURST, J. (concurring in the result)).

b. *Substantive argument.*

There is insufficient evidence to support the trial court's finding that Mr. Munoz-Rivera has the present and future ability to pay legal financial obligations. Courts may require an indigent defendant to reimburse the state for the costs only if the defendant has the financial ability to do so. *Fuller v. Oregon*, 417 U.S. 40, 47–48, 94 S.Ct. 2116, 40 L.Ed.2d 642 (1974); *State v. Curry*, 118 Wn.2d 911, 915–16, 829 P.2d 166 (1992); RCW 10.01.160(3); RCW 9.94A.760(2). The imposition of costs under a scheme that does not meet with these requirements, or the imposition of a penalty for a failure to pay absent proof that the defendant had the ability to

pay, violates the defendant's right to equal protection under Washington Constitution, Article 1, § 12 and United States Constitution, Fourteenth Amendment. *Fuller v. Oregon*, supra. It further violates equal protection by imposing extra punishment on a defendant due to his or her poverty. *Bearden v. Georgia*, 461 U.S. 660, 665, 103 S.Ct. 2064, 2071, 76 L.Ed.2d 221 (1983).

RCW 9.94A.760(1) provides that upon a criminal conviction, a superior court "may order the payment of a legal financial obligation." RCW 10.01.160(1) authorizes a superior court to "require a defendant to pay costs." These costs "shall be limited to expenses specially incurred by the state in prosecuting the defendant." RCW 10.01.160(2). In addition, "[t]he court shall not order a defendant to pay costs unless the defendant is or will be able to pay them." RCW 10.01.160(3). RCW 10.01.160(3) requires the record to reflect that the sentencing judge made an individualized inquiry into the defendant's current and future ability to pay before the court imposes LFOs. *Blazina*, 344 P.3d at 685. "This inquiry also requires the court to consider important factors, such as incarceration and a defendant's other debts, including restitution, when determining a defendant's ability to pay." *Id.* The remedy for a trial court's failure to make this inquiry is remand for a new sentencing hearing. *Id.*

Blazina further held trial courts should look to the comment in court rule GR 34 for guidance. *Id.* This rule allows a person to obtain a waiver of filing fees and surcharges on the basis of indigent status, and the comment to the rule lists ways that a person may prove indigent status. *Id.* (citing GR 34). For example, under the rule, courts must find a person indigent if the person establishes that he or she receives assistance from a needs-based, means-tested assistance program, such as Social Security or food stamps. *Id.* (citing comment to GR 34 listing facts that prove indigent status). In addition, courts must find a person indigent if his or her household income falls below 125 percent of the federal poverty guideline. *Id.* Although the ways to establish indigent status remain non-exhaustive, if someone does meet the GR 34 standard for indigency, courts should seriously question that person's ability to pay LFOs. *Id.*

While the ability to pay is a necessary threshold to the imposition of costs, a court need not make formal specific findings of ability to pay: "[n]either the statute nor the constitution requires a trial court to enter formal, specific findings regarding a defendant's ability to pay court costs." *Curry*, 118 Wn.2d at 916. However, *Curry* recognized that both RCW 10.01.160 and the federal constitution "direct [a court] to consider ability

to pay." *Id.* at 915–16. The individualized inquiry must be made on the record and before the court imposes LFOs. *Blazina*, 344 P.3d at 685.

Here, the judgment and sentence contains a boilerplate statement that the trial court has “considered” Mr. Munoz-Rivera’s present or future ability to pay legal financial obligations. It contains a similar boilerplate “finding” that the defendant is not disabled and therefore has the ability or likely future ability to pay the LFOs imposed by the court. CP 11. A finding must have support in the record. A trial court's findings of fact must be supported by substantial evidence. *State v. Brockob*, 159 Wn.2d 311, 343, 150 P.3d 59 (2006) (citing *Nordstrom Credit, Inc. v. Dep't of Revenue*, 120 Wn.2d 935, 939, 845 P.2d 1331 (1993)). The trial court's determination “as to the defendant's resources and ability to pay is essentially factual and should be reviewed under the clearly erroneous standard.” *State v. Bertrand*, 165 Wn. App. 393, 267 P.3d 511, 517 fn.13 (2011), citing *State v. Baldwin*, 63 Wn. App. 303, 312, 818 P.2d 1116, 837 P.2d 646 (1991).

“Although *Baldwin* does not require formal findings of fact about a defendant's present or future ability to pay LFOs, the record must be sufficient for [the appellate court] to review whether ‘the trial court judge took into account the financial resources of the defendant and the nature of

the burden imposed by LFOs under the clearly erroneous standard.’ ”
Bertrand, 165 Wn. App. 393, 267 P.3d at 517, citing *Baldwin*, 63 Wn.
App. at 312 (bracketed material added) (internal citation omitted).

Here, despite the boilerplate language in paragraph 2.5 of the judgment and sentence, the record does not show the trial court took into account Mr. Munoz-Rivera’s financial resources and the potential burden of imposing LFOs on him. The court imposed discretionary costs of \$1,581.25¹ and mandatory costs of \$1,502.42² for a total Legal Financial Obligation (“LFO”) of \$3,083.67. CP 12. The court sentenced Mr. Munoz-Rivera to 25 months of confinement. CP 15. Despite finding him indigent for trial and this appeal, the sentencing court made boilerplate findings Mr. Munoz-Rivera had the present and future ability to pay LFOs and ordered LFO payments of \$100 per month to begin immediately. SCOMIS #12 (filed 11/19/13) and #84 (filed 3/25/14); CP 11, 13. The court uttered a total of 134 words during the sentencing hearing and did not once inquire into Mr. Munoz-Rivera’s financial resources or consider on the record the burden payment of LFOs would impose on him in light of

¹ Consisting of \$381.25 sheriff service fee, \$700 court-appointed attorney fee and \$500 fine pursuant to RCW 9A.20.021. CP 12.

² Consisting of \$452.42 restitution, \$250 jury demand fee, \$500 victim assessment, \$200 criminal filing fee and \$100 felony DNA collection fee. CP 12.

debt, incarceration or other relevant factors identified in *Blazina*. 3/25/14
RP 7, 9–10.

Since the boilerplate finding that Mr. Munoz-Rivera has the present or future ability to pay LFOs is not supported by the record, the matter should be remanded for the sentencing court to make an individualized inquiry into Mr. Munoz-Rivera's 's current and future ability to pay before imposing LFOs. *Blazina*, 344 P.3d at 685.

D. CONCLUSION

For the reasons stated above and in the Brief of Appellant, the matter should be remanded to reverse and dismiss the convictions of second degree assault and felony harassment. Alternatively the matter should be remanded to remove the designation of “K.T. (DOB: 11/27/03)” as a protected party on the Domestic Violence No-Contact Order and for resentencing to use a correct offender score, remove offending conditions of sentence, make individualized inquiry into the defendant's current and future ability to pay before imposing any legal financial obligations, and remove the incorrect finding regarding an exceptional sentence.

Respectfully submitted on May 4, 2015.

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PROOF OF SERVICE (RAP 18.5(b))

I, Susan Marie Gasch, do hereby certify under penalty of perjury that on May 4, 2015, I mailed to the following by U.S. Postal Service first class mail, postage prepaid, or provided e-mail service by prior agreement (as indicated), a true and correct copy of reply brief of appellant:

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