

County turns up heat on felons who owe fines, restitution

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Convicted felons who have been dodging payments on their fines and restitution may soon find their wages garnished by a collection agency that will charge them steep fees on top of the debt they already owe, Cowlitz County Superior Court Clerk Beverly Little said.

Earlier this month, the clerk's office outsourced much of its collections operation to Dynamic Collectors of Chehalis, a private company. Little said the company will go after an estimated \$39 million in unpaid damages owed to crime victims and fines owed to the county.

"They garnish and go after them furiously," Little said.

The clerk's office's two-member collections team has historically gone easier on felons, allowing them to make payments as small \$5 as long as they keep in touch and pay regularly, Little said. One collections clerk will remain in place to continue working with those who make payments in good faith. (The second clerk has been assigned other duties.)

If felons stop making payments, their accounts could be handed over to Dynamic. Little said Dynamic will keep 40 percent of what it collects. She said she does not expect that the county and crime victims will get less money in the long run because the collections agency will charge felons an additional 40 percent to cover its fees.

Little said collections are not a required function of the clerk's office under state law, adding that budget and staff shortages prompted her to hand delinquent accounts over to the Chehalis company.

The clerk's office has lost five staff members since 2008, Little said. The office, with a budget of about \$1 million, now has a staff of 16.

Privatizing a portion of the collections department is one of several significant changes Little has brought to the office since she defeated incumbent Roni Booth in the November 2010 election.

Shortly after she took office, Little reopened the office's front doors, which were shut by her predecessor. Booth, citing budget cuts, had reduced access to a single window through which the public could talk to a clerk and placed a drop box for court documents in front of the office.

Little also rejected a federal grant, won by Booth shortly before the election, that would have placed computer terminals in the upstairs lobby of the Hall of Justice where the public could access printed legal forms and learn about legal and social services. Little said late last week that the county would have had to spend at least \$30,000 to participate in the grant program at a time when the clerk's office could not afford the expense.

"There was no money. There was no staff to man it. Our doors were open for public service and it was no longer needed," Little said.