

Jail inmates walk away from debts to county

Nearly \$400,000 forgiven in unpaid fees

By Scott Williams

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ELKHORN — Johnny Littlejohn was sent to the Walworth County Jail in 2014 for failure to pay child support.

When he was released a year later, he had a new unpaid debt: costs that the county had incurred providing for his basic needs in the jail.

For Littlejohn, the bill was almost \$10,000.

The county will never collect.

County officials have agreed to write off nearly \$400,000 in unpaid debts owed by former county jail inmates going back as far as 2008.

County Administrator David Bretl said even when the county is able to track down former jail inmates, they often have little money and are struggling to find employment.

"It's a very tough group to collect from," Bretl said.

But county officials soon could have a new weapon for collections.

Kristy Secord, the county's clerk of circuit courts, said she has found success with a state-run program that can access a debtor's bank accounts or

intercept federal tax returns.

Created in 2009, the State Debt Collection program gives state agencies expanded powers for collecting overdue payments to state government agencies — or local governments that ask for assistance.

A local government, such as Walworth County, must simply sign an agreement to cover the state's expenses by sharing proceeds that are successfully recouped.

Secord, whose office collects court fines, said she has collected about \$400,000 in overdue fines and fees in recent months that could have otherwise taken years to collect — if ever.

Secord said she has been in contact with the county jail and other county departments about improving their collections, too, through the state collection program.

"It's been very, very useful," she said. Referring to debtors, she added, "It gets a lot of people's attention."

For the county jail, more than 400 former inmates were discharged

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Johnny Littlejohn:
\$9,913