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## Judge: Alabama city running 'extortion racket'

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**Ap** Written by Associated Press

COLUMBIANA — A judge has temporarily shut down what he called a "debtors prison" run by the municipal court of an Alabama city.

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In an order filed Wednesday, Shelby County Circuit Court Judge Hub Harrington said the Harpersville Municipal Court was running a "judicially sanctioned extortion racket."

Harrington wrote that the court's actions repeatedly violated the constitutional rights of defendants who appeared before it. The judge found that if defendants weren't able to immediately pay court-imposed fines and fees, they were trapped into paying several times the amount when their cases were turned over to a private probation company.

Harrington has taken control of cases in Harpersville involving people jailed for failing to pay court fines and fees. He also ordered city and probation company officials to attend an Aug. 20 hearing.

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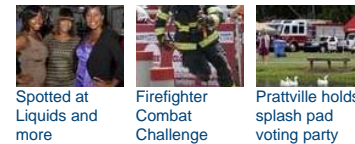
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