

Report on Countywide Fee Assessment



To: Board of County Commissioners
From: Office of the Chief Operating Officer
Date: February 28, 2026

Purpose

This report fulfills [FY26 Budget Note 10](#). This budget note requests the Chair to direct the Chief Operating Officer's Office to conduct a comprehensive, countywide fee assessment and by February 28, 2026, provide a report to the Commission that considers impacts payers, consistency across similar fees and recommendations on appropriate levels of cost recovery and fee waivers. All fees associated with this report can be accessed here: [FY26 Fee Schedule](#)

Background

Multnomah County departments collect various fees, including administrative and program fees (as of January 1st), as detailed in the FY 2026 Fees schedule (Sheet: All Fees). Fees are governed by various authorities, including County Code sections, Board Resolutions, and Oregon Revised Statutes (ORS). A review of the fee schedule reveals different approaches to exemptions and requirements.

Varied Approaches

Analysis of the "Exemption Policy" column in the FY 2026 Fees schedule indicates variation in how fee exemptions are applied across County programs. Though some exemptions are expected to be different depending on the source of the fee (State vs. County).

1. Mandate Documentation of Cost Recovery

- All departments must complete the "Cost Recovery" column for every program fee listed in the annual fee schedule.
- For fees with recovery rates significantly above or below 100% (e.g., outside the 90%-100% range), a clear justification must be provided in the "Notes" column explaining the variance (e.g., mandated by ORS, intentional subsidy for public benefit, or inclusion of administrative overhead/contingency).

2. **Existence of an Exemption Policy:** Some fees have clearly documented exemption policies, while many others do not.
 - *Examples with clear policies:*
 - The Department of Community Justice (DCJ) Parenting Education Program offers a fee waiver for clients at or below 130% of the Federal Poverty level and a half-price charge for those at or below 185%.
 - The DCM fee for waiver of the marriage three-day waiting period is waived for active military deployment.
 - *Examples with no explicit exemption policy listed:* The majority of the listed fees, including most of the District Attorney (DA) Public Records and Discovery Fees, and all of the Department of County Management (DCM) Administrative Fees related to dishonored checks, accounting, and information, do not have an exemption policy noted.
3. **Explicit Prohibition of Exemptions:** In some cases, the policy explicitly states that no exemption exists, indicating a hard-and-fast rule for full cost recovery.
 - *Examples:* The Department of Community Human Services (DCHS) License Fee Adult Care Homes specifies "There is no exception to paying the \$15 criminal record fee," the "\$60 per bed (maximum \$300) annual fee," the "\$25 resident manager application fee," and the "\$10 caregiver application fee."
4. **Waiver for Clerical/Administrative Error:** One specific instance notes an exemption for errors made by the County or a presiding judicial officer.
 - *Example:* The DCM fee for processing an amendment to a marriage license or state domestic partnership certificate is "(Seldom) Fee is waived for clerical errors from our office or the office of the judge."
5. **Exemption for Victims of Crime:** One program has an exemption based on the nature of the requestor.
 - *Example:* DCJ's General Records Request Filing fee notes: "There is no filing fee for records requests made by a victim of a crime."

Recommendations

To ensure equitable, transparent, and consistent financial management across Multnomah County, the following recommendations are made for standardizing expectations for fee exemption policies:

- 1. Develop a County-Wide Fee Exemption Policy Framework:** The County should develop a standard framework that mandates all departments to document and justify the existence or absence of a fee exemption policy for every program fee charged. Though some exemptions are expected to be different depending on the source of the fee (State vs. County). This framework should consider:
 - **Financial Hardship:** Establish consistent Federal Poverty Level (FPL) thresholds (e.g., 130% FPL, 185% FPL) for fee waivers/reductions across all eligible program fees, similar to the DCJ Parenting Education Program, and documentation requirements to trigger exemption
 - **Clerical Error:** Standardize the policy that fees resulting from County or judicial clerical/administrative errors shall be waived.
 - **Statutory Requirements:** Clearly delineate which exemptions are mandatory or prohibited under State or Federal law or rule.
 - **Specific Populations:** Documented exemptions for specific populations such as victims of crime (DCJ) or active military personnel (DCM).
- 2. Mandate Documentation of Fee Exemptions:** For all fees collected by the County, a clear "Exemption Policy" must be included with fee documentation, including:
 - The specific, approved exemption policy (e.g., income-based criteria).
 - Directions on how to apply for the exemption.
 - A clear statement that "No Exemption Policy Exists," with a justification (e.g., "Full cost recovery is mandated by County policy").
- 3. Review and Approve Discrepancies:** All existing fee exemption policies that fall outside the new County-wide framework should require documented justification for an exemption and approval by the COO office.

Report on Countywide Fee Assessment



Implementing these recommendations will improve accountability, ensure fair and equitable access to County services, and standardize financial practices across all Multnomah County departments.

(As a reminder, the Board has received recent fee studies from DCS, including MCAS, Transportation, and Land Use. The Board made updates in DCS fees that are not included in the fee worksheet)