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Federal Lawsuit Questions St. Louis Suburb's Municipal Fines.

ST. LOUIS — A federal lawsuit filed Wednesday alleged a St. Louis suburb whose population is largely black relentlessly tickets for things such as mismatched curtains, walking on the wrong side of a crosswalk and barbecuing in front of a house.

The Arlington, Virginia-based Institute for Justice, a public interest law firm, filed the suit on behalf of two Pagedale residents and is seeking class-action status. The lawsuit also asks a judge to halt the 33,000-resident suburb that's just north of St. Louis from future enforcement of codes that the suit considers an unconstitutional tactic to feed city coffers.

The number of non-traffic municipal fines issued in Pagedale, which has a roughly 93 percent black population, has soared by nearly 500 percent in the past five years, the lawsuit said, with revenue from non-traffic tickets making up nearly one-fifth of the city's budget.

Last year, the lawsuit said, 2,255 non-traffic tickets were doled out under the municipal code that authorizes citations for such things as having mismatched curtains, walking on the left side of a crosswalk, wearing saggy pants, having holes in window screens and having a barbecue in front of a house, according to the lawsuit.

"This case demonstrates that property rights are fundamentally civil rights," said William Mauer, the law firm's senior attorney and the plaintiffs' lead counsel. "Pagedale treats its residents like walking, talking ATMs, making withdrawals by issuing tickets for ridiculous things that no city has a right to dictate."

An Associated Press message seeking comment from Pagedale Mayor Mary Louise Carter was not immediately returned.

The lawsuit comes four months after Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon signed into law a measure that limits cities' ability to profit from traffic tickets and court fines. That marked the first significant step taken by state lawmakers to address concerns raised after the August 2014 police shooting in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson. Eighteen-year-old Michael Brown, who was black, was unarmed when he was shot to death by white Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson during a confrontation in a street.

A St. Louis County grand jury and the U.S. Justice Department cleared Wilson in Brown's death, concluding evidence backed his claim that he shot Brown in self-defense after Brown first tried to grab the officer's gun during a struggle through the window of Wilson's police vehicle, then came toward him threateningly after briefly running away.

But the Justice Department issued a report in March, saying there was racial bias and profiling in Ferguson's policing as well as a profit-driven municipal court system that frequently targeted blacks, who make up about two-thirds of Ferguson's populace.

Since then, practices of many municipal court systems throughout the St. Louis area came under

increased scrutiny.

Wednesday's lawsuit was filed on behalf of Valarie Whitner and Vincent Blount, housemates who the suit alleges have received more than \$2,800 in fines for such alleged infractions as having a downspout with chipping paint, not having a screen door behind their home and having weeds in their vegetable garden.

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NOV. 4, 2015, 5:43 P.M. E.S.T.

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