



FELONY PROBATION: Georgia and U.S. Constitutional Law

— A Bench Card for Judges —

This bench card is designed to provide judges with guidance on the relevant legal principles regarding felony probation. It focuses in particular on how to address the situation of indigent defendants and probationers and contains information about recent changes to Georgia law and S.B. 174 (2017) such as the new Behavioral Incentive Date and the new provisions on early termination for probationers under sentence for a qualified offense.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

CONSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS BEFORE IMPOSING OR REVOKING PROBATION

- Before being placed on probation, a defendant is entitled to the assistance of counsel absent a proper waiver. *Alabama v. Shelton*, 535 U.S. 654, 658 (2002).
- **When revoking probation, a court must find that the probationer has willfully violated probation conditions.** Failure to comply is not willful if the probationer lacks notice of a condition. *Douglas v. Buder*, 412 U.S. 430, 432 (1973) (per curiam).
- Failure to comply is not willful if the probationer lacks the ability to comply. *Bearden v. Georgia*, 461 U.S. 660, 672-73 (1983). A probationer may not be imprisoned for failing to pay fines, fees, or restitution if the court has not inquired into the reasons for failure to pay. **If the failure to pay is not willful, the court must consider alternate measures of punishment other than imprisonment.** *Id.*
- In revocation proceedings, the probationer must be informed of the right to request counsel. *Gagnon v. Scarpelli*, 411 U.S. 778, 790 (1973). If counsel is denied, the reasons must be stated in the record. *Id.*
- There is no categorical Sixth Amendment right to appointment of counsel in probation revocation proceedings, only a more limited due process right, determined on a case-by-case basis where fundamental fairness requires it. *Gagnon v. Scarpelli*, 411 U.S. 778, 790 (1973).
- In determining whether due process demands the appointment of counsel, the court should consider whether “the probationer makes such a request based on a timely and colorable claim (i) that he has not committed the alleged violation of

the conditions upon which he is at liberty; or (ii) that, even if the violation is a matter of public record or is uncontested, there are substantial reasons which justified or mitigated the violation and make revocation inappropriate, and that the reasons are complex or otherwise difficult to develop or present.” The court “also should consider, especially in doubtful cases, whether the probationer appears to be capable of speaking effectively for himself.” *Gagnon v. Scarpelli*, 411 U.S. 778, 790-791 (1973).

GEORGIA LAW REGARDING INDIGENT DEFENDANTS AND DEFENDANTS WITH A “SIGNIFICANT FINANCIAL HARDSHIP”

- Prior to or subsequent to sentencing, **if the defendant is unable to pay or demonstrates a significant financial hardship, the court must:**
 - o **Waive** the fine, surcharges, or fees;
 - o **Reduce** the fine, surcharges, or fees to an amount that the defendant can pay; and/or
 - o **Convert** the fine, surcharges, or fees to community service. O.C.G.A. § 42-8-34(e)(3)(B).
- Notably, Georgia law now defines significant financial hardship as occurring where there is *a reasonable probability that the defendant will be unable to satisfy his or her financial obligations for two or more consecutive months.* O.C.G.A. § 42-8-34(e)(3)(iii). A significant financial hardship is presumed where the defendant:
 - o Has a developmental disability under O.C.G.A. § 37-1-1;
 - o Is totally and permanently disabled under O.C.G.A. § 49-4-80;
 - o Earns less than 100% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines;
 - o Has been released from confinement within the past 12 months and was incarcerated for more than 30 days before release.

SETTING FINES AND FEES IN FELONY PROBATION CASES

SETTING FINES, FEES, AND RESTITUTION

O.C.G.A. §§ 17-14-10(a), 17-14-7, 42-8-34(e)(1)

If fines, restitution, or probation supervision fees are imposed, the amount should be adjusted to the defendant’s circumstances, including:

- The defendant’s financial resources and income;
- The defendant’s financial obligations and dependents;
- The length of the defendant’s probation sentence;
- The goals of deterrence, retribution, and rehabilitation;
- Any other factor the court deems appropriate to consider. If restitution is imposed, the court **must** consider, in addition to the above factors, the amount of damages and any restitution previously made. If the amount of restitution is contested, the

court **must** hold a hearing at which the burden is on the State to establish the amount of the victim’s loss, and the burden is on the defendant to establish hardships justifying a reduction in the restitution amount.

CONVERTING FINES & FEES TO COMMUNITY SERVICE

O.C.G.A. §§ 17-10-1(d), 42-8-34(e)(2)

The court may convert fines, surcharges, or probation supervision fees to community service. The number of service hours is determined by dividing the fine, surcharges, or fees by an appropriate hourly wage set by the court, which may be higher than minimum wage.

FELONY PROBATION, BEHAVIORAL INCENTIVE DATE* O.C.G.A. § 17-1-7(a)(1)(B)

A behavioral incentive date (BID) is required for all **newly sentenced felony probationers who are sentenced to a straight probated sentence and who have no prior felony convictions.**

- BID must not exceed three years from the date the sentence is imposed.
- The Department of Community Supervision (DCS) shall provide the court with an order to terminate supervision within 60 days of the BID if the following conditions are met:
 - o No arrests for anything other than non-serious traffic offenses;
 - o The probationer has been compliant with all of his or her probation conditions; and
 - o Has paid all restitution owed.

- If the above conditions are met the court **may** execute the order if the court feels it would be in the best interests of justice and the welfare of society to do so.
- The prosecuting attorney may request a hearing within 30 days of the order being issued.
- This provision does not apply to probationers on a split sentence.
- A successfully completed first offender act sentence, O.C.G.A. § 42-8-60, or conditional discharge sentence, O.C.G.A. § 16-13-2 does not count as a prior felony conviction.

PROBATION OFFICER REPORTS AND PETITIONS FOR EARLY TERMINATION FOR PROBATIONERS WHO HAVE BEEN COMPLIANT FOR THREE (3) YEARS*

O.C.G.A. § 42-8-37(c)(1-3)

Probation officers must issue a report on probationers who have been sentenced to three or more years of probation.

The report shall state whether the probationer has had any new arrests for anything other than a non-serious traffic offense, has been compliant with all of his or her probation conditions, and the status of the probationer's payments towards restitution, fines, and fees.

These reports shall be issued after three years of probation, and then annually thereafter. Each report shall be submitted to the sentencing court along with the probation officer's recommendation as to whether early termination of probation is appropriate.

For probationers on probation for a qualified offense, DCS shall file a petition to terminate probation if, after serving three years on probation, the probationer has:

- No new arrests for anything other than a non-serious traffic offense;
 - Paid all restitution owed; and
 - Has not had his or her probation revoked during this period.
- When presented with this petition, **the court shall take whatever action it determines would be for the best interest of justice and the welfare of society.**

This procedure is intended to be retroactive and applied to any probationer under the supervision of DCS.

QUALIFIED OFFENSES

- Burglary in the second degree
- Possession of tools for the commission of crime;
- Criminal damage to property in the second degree
- Interference with government property;
- Arson in the third degree;
- Burning of woodlands, brush, fields, or other lands in violation of O.C.G.A. § 16-7-63 when the punishment is as set forth in paragraph (2) of subsection (c) of Code Section 16-7-63(c)(2);
- Theft and financial transaction card offenses under \$25,000;
- Theft by shoplifting
- Refund fraud;

- Conversion of payments for real property improvements;
- Entering an automobile or other motor vehicle with intent to commit theft or felony;
- Livestock theft;
- Forgery;
- Printing, executing, or negotiating checks, drafts, orders, or debit card sales drafts knowing information thereon to be in error, fictitious, or assigned to another account;
- Failing to pay for natural products or chattels;
- Purchasing, possessing, manufacturing, delivering, distributing, administering,

- selling, or possessing with the intent to distribute controlled substances, marijuana, counterfeit substances, or flunitrazepam;
- Unlawfully manufacturing, delivering, distributing, selling, or possessing with the intent to distribute noncontrolled substances;
- Possession of substances containing ephedrine or pseudoephedrine or sales of products containing those ingredients in violation of O.C.G.A. § 16-13-30.3(b)(3);
- Violation of Article 3 of Chapter 13 of Title 16 when the punishment is as set O.C.G.A. § 16-13-79(b).

PROBATION AND PAROLE CONDITIONS* O.C.G.A. § 42-9-42(D)(1)

Any person who is paroled shall be released on such terms and conditions as the board shall prescribe, and if he or she is serving a split sentence, the board's conditions shall include all of the terms of probation imposed by the sentencing court.

PAROLE COMMUTATION* O.C.G.A. § 42-9-52

When a parolee or conditional releasee is serving a split sentence for a qualified offense, the board shall review such case after such parolee or conditional release has successfully completed 12 consecutive months of parole supervision to

consider commutation of such sentence. If commuted, this would put the supervision of the offender under the court's control sooner.

*Indicates laws passed in 2017 as part of the Criminal Justice Reform Council's Legislative Package