

[What does Tarrant County know that Dallas doesn't when it comes to bail bonds?](#)



By

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This newspaper's [investigation](#) into Dallas County's fatally flawed approach to bond forfeitures has revealed a number of startling facts and figures -- namely, that bail bondsmen owe the county at least \$35 million in uncollected default judgments. Similarly disconcerting is the contrast between Dallas and Tarrant counties in this realm.

Last year, Dallas County collected \$184,746 in felony forfeiture cases. [Tarrant County](#), which has a smaller population, brought in \$889,403 from felony forfeiture cases. Dallas' revenue has been dropping in recent years, while Tarrant's has been on the rise. So, what does Tarrant know that Dallas does not?

I posed this question to Tom Wilder, Tarrant County's district clerk. Wilder's actually a Dallas guy from way back -- he graduated from [Thomas Jefferson](#) High School here -- so he's not looking to cast aspersions on our county. He emphasized that he hasn't studied Dallas County's approach to bail bond forfeitures. But in explaining Tarrant County's modus operandi, some clear differences emerged.

Dallas County officials have complained their outdated computer system, blaming it for some of their bail bond woes. Tarrant County has similarly antiquated software that was built in the 1980s and still runs through an old mainframe. But they've managed to create some measure of updated functionality. Dallas County officials have described a system that relies on tracking forfeiture cases manually, with clerks actually writing down due dates. In Tarrant County, computers track unpaid judgments, and when the due dates pass, the computers automatically cut the offending bondsmen off -- they can't write any more bonds. "That usually brings them in to pay up," Wilder says.

Perhaps the most notable distinction can be found in the county's bail bond boards. Dallas County has such a board, but it doesn't seem to do much when it comes to tracking unpaid forfeitures or taking action when bondsmen are delinquent. Some on the board say they haven't been alerted to those who haven't paid. So, the board hasn't revoked a single license in recent memory.

Not so in Tarrant County. If you're a repeat offender, you'll be hauled before the board. Disciplinary hearings are held. Witnesses are called. But does the board actually revoke licenses? "Oh, absolutely,"

Wilder says. The board doesn't hesitate to revoke or suspend a bondsman's license when appropriate. "We're not going to tolerate a fast and loose attitude," Wilder said.

Wilder sees some weaknesses in the state's approach to bail bonds, and he'd like to see a few reforms. He's pretty confident, though, that Tarrant County has a good handle on who owes what when it comes to bond forfeitures. He says he's bewildered that Dallas County auditors didn't turn up these problems years ago. While it's unclear how that happened, this much is certain: Tarrant County has a lot more forfeiture money in its coffers than Dallas County does.