



# THE PORTNOFF REPORTER

SPRING 2020

## Working with Those in Need

### Customer Service 101

In these difficult times, some of your constituents may need assistance in paying their taxes and fees. For those municipalities that have the ability to do this, we recommend allowing property owners the ability to pay over time through the establishment of a payment schedule. Most residents want to pay their bills, and working with them is a win-win situation. The property owner has the dignity of paying his obligations consistent with his means, and the taxing district gets the money without the need to compromise the balance. Conversely, an all-or-nothing approach can backfire.

When establishing payment plans, it is important to set firm guidelines that are uniformly available to all delinquent property owners. This is not to say that every property owner should get the same payment options or terms. You may want to consider the following questions: Should non-owner-occupied properties be given the same opportunities as owner-occupied properties? Should businesses be treated the same way as residential properties? Should financial need be a factor in any payment plan? It is important to discuss these factors with your solicitor to avoid any claim of discrimination.

Once an agreement is reached, it is important to clearly establish an amount and date of the regular payments. It also is important to limit payment plans to a finite time period. When payment plans are permitted to extend indefinitely, there is little chance that the property owner will be in a position to pay the next current bill on time. The goal should be to help residents pay off their delinquent balance, while putting them on the road to paying current bills when they become due.

By working with those most in need, municipalities will likely receive more money over time, along with the gratitude of their residents.



PORTNOFF  
LAW ASSOCIATES, LTD.

#### In This Issue

By the Numbers .....	2	Notes of Appreciation .....	3
Hiring Portnoff .....	2	Portnoff Milestone .....	2
In Person .....	2	Remote Working Tips .....	3

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## THE PORTNOFF REPORTER

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### In Person

#### February 2020

Portnoff Attorney Kevin Buraks spoke at the Pocono Mountains COG meeting in Monroe County to discuss collecting delinquent municipal accounts.

#### March 2020

Attorney Buraks was scheduled to present a seminar at the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials (PASBO) annual conference, titled: "Strategies to Increase Delinquent Tax Collections and Current Tax Collections." The conference is postponed until March 2021.

#### April 2020

Portnoff attorneys Michelle Portnoff, Jason Leininger and Kevin Buraks were scheduled to give a presentation at the Government Financial Officers Association of Pennsylvania (GFOA-PA) annual conference, titled: "Record Retention Practices and Strategies for Municipal Fee Billing." The conference is postponed until May 2021.

#### May 2020

Portnoff attorneys Buraks and Leininger were scheduled to present a seminar at the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors (PSATS) annual conference, titled: "What is a Municipal Claim and Why Does it Matter?" PSATS is hoping to reschedule the conference for later this year.

If you are interested in having Portnoff Law Associates present at your next conference or event (in person or virtually), please contact us at (800) 561-7989.

## Hiring Portnoff

Portnoff Law Associates represents over 150 municipalities, school districts and municipal authorities across 24 Pennsylvania counties. Portnoff's proven collection process can be tailored to meet your specific collection needs, and we are available to meet with you to discuss the benefits of our services. If you are interested in learning more about how Portnoff can help maximize your delinquent collections at minimal cost to your municipality, please contact us at (800) 561-7989 or sanderson@portnoffonline.com.

### By The Numbers

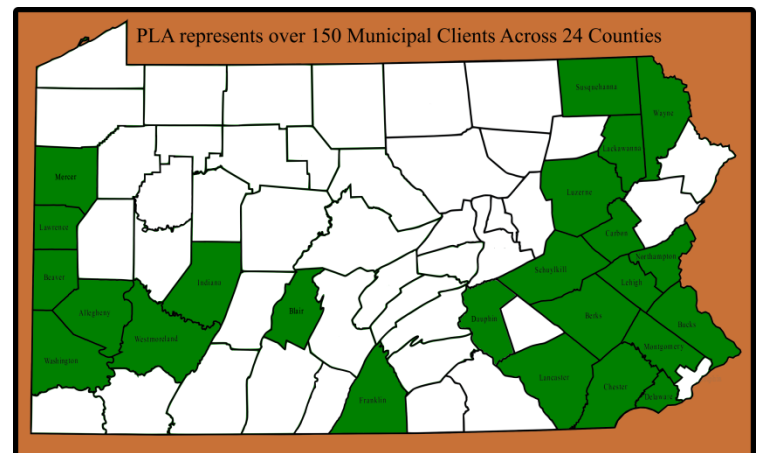
<b>51,383</b>	Number of delinquent accounts turned over for collection in 2019
<b>9,124</b>	Number of payment plans provided to delinquent property owners in 2019
<b>25,628</b>	Number of payment plans provided to delinquent property owners by Portnoff over the last 5 years
<b>2,783</b>	Number of property owners participating in Portnoff's hardship program in 2019
<b>9,201</b>	Number of property owners participating in Portnoff's hardship program over the last 5 years

## Portnoff Law Associates, Ltd.

### Now Represents

### 50 Public School Districts

Portnoff Law Associates is pleased to announce that with the addition of five new school district clients this year, it now collects delinquent real estate taxes for 50 public school districts! This constitutes 10% of all public school districts in Pennsylvania. Portnoff now represents over 150 municipal clients in 24 Pennsylvania counties. This is a big jump from representing just five municipal clients when we opened in 1989, all five of which remain clients to this day.



# Michelle Portnoff's Remote Working Tips

## *From a Person Who Loves a Brick and Mortar Workplace*

On March 12, 2020, Governor Wolf entered an order in response to the coronavirus epidemic, directing that people limit their social interactions. Within 7 days, the Governor's order expanded to close all non life-sustaining places of business. Portnoff Law Associates had just those 7 days to prepare for remote operations.

Fortunately, we had the technology in place to make this possible. For years we have invested in secure remote work methods, including Virtual Private Network (VPN) connections. Additionally in 2019, we purchased a new phone system with the capability for our firm to securely make and receive calls from any location. Prior to the closure, a handful of our 79 employees worked remotely, but this development forced us to move quickly to transition nearly all office functions to remote work. A month into remote work, this article will share lessons learned.

First, just because the technology exists does not mean that the user will quickly adapt. It was hard for me to adjust to the slower pace of getting things done. I blamed technology for problems that were user error. For instance, until I got a full size monitor and keyboard, I thought my VPN was the reason that it took so long for me to read a document. However, the problem was not the VPN, it was my home work environment. My criterion when I purchased a laptop computer for home use was that it would be lightweight so that I would be able to carry it around. I did not think about the sacrifice I would be making with a small screen and the impact that would have on the font size during extended use. My work was slow because I could not read the characters without eyestrain. Fortunately, my husband suggested that I try using a full size monitor. That solution transformed my ability to work from home. I recommend that you take time to think carefully about the stumbling blocks that you face, because there may be a quick solution.

Second, I focused exclusively on the work in front of me. There were no casual conversations around the coffee station or on my way to my office. This negatively impacted my work product. I did not realize the impact until I reached out to my secretary with whom I had not spoken in a couple of days, just to see how she was doing. That conversation was the genesis of content for an office-wide newsletter that I was struggling to write. I will no longer underestimate the benefit of a casual conversation. It sparks creativity!

There are certain functions that I now realize can be handled just as well remotely as on-site. Historically, our employees handling property owner calls were restricted to on-site work for purposes of quality control. The need to work remotely has made me realize that we have the technology in place to maintain quality of service and management control, regardless of location. This is a wonderful realization because it may be a way for PLA to expand its labor pool. Because we now have the protocols in place, this is something that we will explore in the future.

I am firmly in the camp of those who love the energy of a brick and mortar workplace. But this experience has been an opportunity to test the limits. I expect that our workforce and work flow will change as a result of the lessons learned. That will be the silver lining to this experience.

## Notes of Appreciation

Portnoff Law Associates frequently receives thank you notes from property owners who appreciate the professional manner and courtesy with which they were treated during the collection process. The following are recent notes that we received:

Thank you, thank you, thank you! Thank you for not treating me like some low life who refused to pay their taxes. Thank you for getting me the necessary information so I can pay them online. Thank you so much for taking the time to answer my email. Hoping to complete this on payday coming up... Have a wonderful day!

A property owner from  
Pine Grove, PA

I know you probably have ... people yell on innocent customer reps on calls. I would like to express my appreciation of excellent customer service from Venus. It took time for her to look up the payment due on each property and I was impressed with her kindness. I do hope you are able to show recognition for the quality of her service on behalf of Portnoff!!

A property owner from  
North Wales, PA



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**CONTACT PORTNOFF LAW ASSOCIATES TODAY TO PROVIDE YOUR RESIDENTS WITH MORE FLEXIBLE PAYMENT OPTIONS THROUGH PORTNOFF'S PAYMENT PLANS, HARDSHIP PROGRAM AND THE ABILITY TO LOOK UP BALANCES AND PAY ONLINE THROUGH PORTNOFF'S WEBSITE 24/7**

With 30+ years of municipal collection experience, Portnoff Law Associates represents over 150 municipalities, school districts and municipal authorities across Pennsylvania in the collection of delinquent:

- Real Estate Taxes
- Abatement of Nuisance Fees
- Water Bills and Tapping Fees
- Trash Fees
- Sewer Fees
- Stormwater Fees



Michelle Portnoff, President  
Portnoff Law Associates

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