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Stolen car costs owner \$5,827.68

Towing dispute, nightmarish results show 'system is broken'

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The repair job was supposed to be straightforward - replace the exhaust system - but for Bertin Ondja'a an aging conglomeration of metal in the belly of his car turned into much more after his car was stolen from a Spring Grove Village auto shop and resurfaced in a Carthage towing yard.

The problem is that Ondja'a wasn't notified his car had been found for nearly nine months. As of today, he owes \$5,827.68 in towing and boarding charges.

The car - found abandoned in Lincoln Heights - is a 13-year-old Volkswagen Jetta with 122,000 miles in its rear-view mirror.

"That car's not worth 10 cents," said Matt Hittinger, of Twin Imports, one of the owners of the auto shop. His twin brother, Mark, places a higher value on the dark blue car - \$2,000 - a far cry from what Ondja'a owes to get it out of hock.

No one wants to take responsibility for the big bill or why Ondja'a was not notified for so long.

On Monday, Darryll's Towing said it is willing to work with the 32-year-old Northside resident and cut away most of the debt. The company will give Ondja'a the car for \$136.32, said Kim Richter, the officer manager.

She said she understands his anger over the original bill, but she noted they too have bills to pay.

Ondja'a wants more than understanding and a smaller bill: He wants his car and someone to take responsibility and admit they erred. "This is crazy," said the urban planner who works in Covington.

"Why should I pay extra when I did nothing wrong" he said. "... I'm willing to fight this. What about all the people who don't have the time to fight this? They are going to quit and let the system win."

When police ask for vehicles to be towed, the towing company gets paid when the owner picks it up. Traditionally that takes a few days - two weeks at best - said Richter.

But 271 days?

The problem started 10 months ago when Ondja'a dropped his car off at Twin Imports. When he was told that a new exhaust system would run him \$500, he said he'd think about it.

The car was there when the twins closed the auto shop for their Thanksgiving break. When they reopened on Dec. 8 and the dark blue Jetta was gone, the Hittingers assumed the owner had picked it up, but then Ondja'a came looking for the car.

A police report was filed Dec. 8 with the city of Cincinnati. It says the car was stolen sometime between Nov. 26 and Dec. 8.

What Ondja'a didn't know is that the car had been found even before he reported it stolen. Someone had

taken the car from Twin Imports and abandoned it in Lincoln Heights, where police had it towed to Darryll's Towing on Dec. 1.

The car remains there today, bumper-to-bumper and door-to-door with another 200 or so vehicles, including a dozen ordered towed by Lincoln Heights. At least five of those have sat unclaimed for a long time, Richter said.

Ondja'a thought his car was long torn apart in a chop shop, since he hadn't heard from the Cincinnati police for half a year.

And then a letter came to Ondja'a house. A certified letter, dated Aug 28, stating the Cincinnati Police Department would take over ownership of the Jetta if Ondja'a doesn't stake claim to it in the next 20 business days.

He's contacted police stations in Cincinnati, Carthage, Lincoln Heights and even the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office - only to be told - "We have nothing to do with this," he said.

Richter said Cincinnati tracked Ondja'a down after a worker at the towing yard sent the vehicle identification number to Cincinnati by mistake.

Time is running out. If the matter isn't resolved by Friday, the title will be turned over so the car can be sold or scrapped.

"What a terrible course of events," said Progressive Auto Insurance broker Ken Henry. "... He's the victim and he shouldn't continue to be victimized."

Ondja'a has heard it all before.

"The system is broken and it needs to be fixed," he said. "... It is not even about the car anymore. It is about the system and getting it fixed. This is crazy. This is unbelievable."
