
Submitted to the Library Board by Central Administrator Courtney Whitaker February 14, 2022

Recommendation for Fine-Free Policy for Wilderness Coast Public Libraries

Recommendation

The Library Directors and Central Administrator recommend that the Wilderness Coast Public Libraries Board eliminate the imposition and collection of overdue fines for late return of materials. The libraries will **continue to bill and collect for lost items** and block patron card access if items are not returned or paid for in a reasonable amount of time. Additionally, the ILL fine policy will remain.

Library Mission and Values

Fines have not been shown to be an effective deterrent to the late return of materials. Fines have been shown to act as an inequitable barrier to service, disproportionately impacting children and community members with the least financial resources. Late fees are therefore in opposition to the Library's core values of equitable service, fostering early literacy, and barrier-free access to information and services. From both a mission and a values perspective, fines should be eliminated.

Lost Revenue

The experience of many libraries that have gone fine-free suggests that a drop in revenue will be offset to a large degree by other savings. Staff time is involved in numerous interactions with patrons that revolve around fines including:

- Negotiating the appropriateness of fines and fine waivers
- Negotiating fine payment plans
- Assisting patrons in paying their fines by cash or check
- Fiscal staff tracking and reconciling payments with fine records

The San Rafael (CA) Public Library analyzed fine transactions and determined that each transaction requires approximately ten minutes of staff time when factoring in payment, processing at service desks, counting and processing of cash, counting cash for deposit, and processing and reconciliation with the finance department.

The Vernon (IL) Public Library District reports that “the cost of staff time to handle overdue fines and of processing amounts to more than what they’re earning back from patrons” ([The End of Overdue Fines? » Public Libraries Online](#))

Additionally, the elimination of library fines has been found to increase usage of library materials, which results in a higher return on investment into the collection.

Research and Experience of Other Library Systems

Public libraries in the state of Florida and across the United States are increasingly eliminating overdue fines. Libraries have begun to recognize that fines serve no positive purpose but act as a significant and inequitable pay barrier to services. There is an increasing body of research and direct experience that supports the elimination of library fines. Libraries that have eliminated fines have consistently reported that

- There is no significant negative impact to the return of materials
- Circulation of materials increases
- Card registration increases
- Staff morale is improved
- Staff time can be redirected from transactions to more patron-focused activities

When the San Rafael Public Library experimented with the elimination of fines for children's materials in 2014 - 2015, they saw a 39% increase in youth card registrations. Remarkably, that increase was driven by a 126% increase in their Pickweed Branch, which serves the most economically disadvantaged neighborhood in San Rafael (San Rafael City Council Agenda Report 1/17/17.)

Nearing the one-year anniversary of instilling the policy, the Algonquin Library of the Vernon Area Public Libraries reports that they have seen no adverse effects. An article in Public Libraries Online reports that "in fact, it's only increased the goodwill of patrons towards the public library. Since introducing the no overdue fines policy, VAPL has also received only positive responses from their patrons and the community at large."

The Colorado State Library issued a White Paper entitled [Removing Barriers to Access](#) that explored the impact of fines and fees on access to library services for children. This comprehensive study concluded that:

- The threat of accumulating fines for overdue materials is keeping low-income families away from libraries.
- Fine-free, patron-friendly policies will bring more community members into the library, especially the low-income families who need the library the most.
- Charging fines does not result in greater circulation of library materials or in the timely return of items.
- The timely administrative and staff costs often equals or exceeds the revenue earned from fines and fees.
- It may be counterproductive to enforce policies that are punitive in nature

Conclusion

The overwhelming body of evidence suggests that fines do not serve their intended purpose of promoting timely return of materials. They do however create significant barriers to access and use of the library and these barriers inequitably impact children and residents with lower incomes. The imposition of fines is at odds with our core values and mission of providing equitable access, promoting learning, and fostering early childhood literacy.

There is much research that suggests that one of the keys to academic and economic success is the early acquisition of vocabulary and reading skills. By disenfranchising children, particularly children from low-income homes, we are not only negatively impacting these children, but the future health and vitality of our cities.

Research also suggests that the small anticipated loss in revenue is likely offset by savings in the costs of imposing, collecting, and managing late fees. Any small loss in revenue will certainly result in a significant benefit to the residents of Jefferson, Wakulla, and Franklin counties in improved access to our collections and services and in the community as we support early literacy and lifelong learning for all, regardless of socioeconomic status.

2019 ALA Midwinter Meeting Resolution on Monetary Library Fines as a Form of Social Inequity

Whereas monetary fines present an economic barrier to access of library materials and services; Whereas there is mounting evidence that indicates eliminating fines increases library card adoption and library usage; Whereas monetary fines create a barrier in public relations, and absorb valuable staff time applying, collecting, and managing dues; Whereas the first policy objective listed in ALA Policy B.8.10 (Library Services to the Poor) as approved by ALA Council on January 27, 2019, states that the American Library Association shall implement these objectives by “Promoting the removal of barriers to library and information services, particularly fees, and overdue charges”; Whereas ALA Policy B.4.2 (Free Access to Information) “asserts that the charging of fees and levies for information services, including those services utilizing the latest information technology, is discriminatory in publicly supported institutions providing library and information services”; Whereas in Economic Barriers to Information Access, An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights, ALA states “All library policies and procedures, particularly those involving fines, fees, or other user charges, should be scrutinized for potential barriers to access; Whereas libraries will need to take determined and pragmatic action to dismantle practices of collecting monetary fines Whereas libraries of all types are responsive to bodies, be they school districts, boards of trustees, college and university administration, or government entities and therefore need to be able to make the case to those bodies about eliminating fines; and Whereas monetary fines ultimately do not serve the core mission of the modern library; now, therefore, be it 2018-2019 ALA CD# 38 (Rev.1/27) 2019 ALA Midwinter Meeting Resolved, that the American Library Association (ALA), on behalf of its members 1. adds a statement to the Policy Manual that establishes that “The American Library Association asserts that imposition of monetary library fines creates a barrier to the provision of library and information services.”; 2. urges libraries to scrutinize their practices of imposing fines on library patrons and actively move towards eliminating them; and 3. urges governing bodies of libraries to strengthen funding support for libraries so they are not dependent on monetary fines as a necessary source of revenue. Mover: Peter Hepburn, Councilor At-Large, 773.426.8082 Seconders: Matt Ciszek, Councilor At-Large, 330.397.3650 Sara Dallas, Councilor At-Large, 518.859.0742 Ed Garcia, Councilor At-Large, 401-497-8992 Version: Final. 1.27.19 4:51 PM