

Final Report to ALA Council

Eliminating Library Fines as a form of Social Equity Working Group

Background

At its 2019 Midwinter Meeting in Seattle, ALA Council passed a Resolution on Eliminating Monetary Library Fines as a Form of Social Inequity (CD #38). The fourth resolved clause called for establishment of a working group to develop information resources, including strategies and tips, for libraries interested in abolishing fines. The working group was charged with delivering a report to Council at the 2019 Annual Conference.

ALA President (2018-2019) Loida Garcia-Febo established the working group in February 2019. The working group brought a preliminary report forward to Council at the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, DC, in June 2019. At that time, working group chair Peter Hepburn sought and received a deadline of August 31, 2019, for delivery of a final report and associated resources to Council. The report that follows is intended to satisfy that requirement and deadline.

Actions

Since its inception, the working group has undertaken the following activities:

- Consulted with membership about what would be useful to them in terms of information resources, strategies, and tips. Group member Sarah Houghton compiled the feedback and distilled it into a set of trends and topics for the group to work from. These trends and topics inform the FAQ document that will be one outcome of the group's work. (See Appendix 1)
- Developed an FAQ document. Group member Mica Johnson set up the framework for a document that could be shared among ALA members and beyond to answer questions about library fines and going fine free. All work group members have contributed to the document. (See Appendix 2)
- Built upon an existing resource that shows which libraries have gone fine-free. Group member Andy Woodworth has maintained a site (<https://endlibraryfines.info>) that the group has been able to consult and append. The group also directs attention to the Urban Libraries Council Fine Free Map (<https://www.urbanlibraries.org/member-resources/fine-free-map>).
- Contacted division leadership to solicit feedback for what should be included in this report.
- Developed a communications plan for sharing the work of the group beyond Council and throughout ALA. (See below)

Commentary

The question of fines remains challenging for libraries. In addition to the feedback provided through its survey and in response to its request sent to the divisions, the working group members also received unsolicited commentary that showed the issue is somewhat divisive. One overarching theme to criticism of a move toward fine free libraries is that ALA, as a national association, cannot and should not set local policy. The working group members do not dispute that simple fact. The decision to go fine free, fully or partially or not at all, must be made by each library working with its governing body and community. Instead, it is hoped that referring to ALA policy will be one more strategy that libraries can use in building cases to go fine free.

This report focuses on two areas. First, it seeks to address some of the questions that the working group members have noted as surrounding the issue of library fines. Second, it seeks to provide models for libraries to follow. The FAQ thereby offer links to various examples from libraries that have gone fine free. There are many more examples as well as media coverage to be found on the sites linked from this report. The working group came to an early realization that, as already noted, there is no single strategy that will fit every library. Rather than attempt to prescribe a manner in which all libraries should move towards eliminating fines, the working group felt it better to provide examples. ***Libraries that are interested in going fine free would do well to connect to peer libraries and seek guidance that may fit their local situations better.***

Finally, while many of the examples in this report come from public library settings, the working group acknowledges the efforts of academic, school, and special libraries in moving toward eliminating fines. Indeed, the members of the working group come from public, academic, and school libraries, and all had insights and anecdotes to share. The challenges to these other libraries may be different than for public libraries given, for example, the more limited user populations that are in place, but there are challenges for these libraries nonetheless. It is hoped that the FAQ and the links provided will be of at least some use in providing guidance. The End Library Fines site, which was foundational in providing information for this report, would welcome inclusion of all types of libraries in its resources.

Communication Plan

The Working Group will

- send the report to Council (September 4, 2019)
- send the report to division leadership (September 4, 2019)
- provide the FAQ as a separate document for posting or inclusion elsewhere (September 4, 2019)
- share the report on individual social media accounts as group members feel appropriate (September 4, 2019 and subsequent to that date)
- ask ALA staff to post the report to the ALA website (September 4, 2019)
- ask ALA staff to share the report on social media platforms through ALA accounts (September 4, 2019 and subsequent to that date)

Submitted September 4, 2019 by

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With thanks to JoAnne Kempf, ALA Staff Liaison (until retirement)

Appendix 1: Results from the survey of ALA members

In March/April 2019, working group member Sarah Houghton surveyed ALA members. The respondents represent a cross-section of library types and functions. After the working group had an initial discussion of the raw data, Houghton then distilled the themes present in the data to what is shared below. The working group offers these not as questions that it has resolved but as potential talking points for libraries considering going fine-free.

Definitions

- Delineate between overdue fines and damaged/lost materials replacement fees

Financial Aspects

- Financial analysis on how much of the library's budget relies on fine revenue (for example, what percentage of funding is generated through fines.)
- Collecting fines costs more than the fine revenue itself
- How to address the argument that you need to replace the revenue that fines currently create
- When fine revenues go to the parent institution's budget, not back to the library
- Making the argument to the stakeholders (governing bodies, elected officials, administrators) which combines anecdotal stories, financial statistics, and current research results.
- Consider an amnesty program for "recent past" fines -- or an overall amnesty wipe out at the time of elimination
- Few libraries use collection agencies so ultimate collection of most fines is a non-starter

Political and Social Equity Aspects

- Fines are a barrier to equitable access to resources and services
- Fines disproportionately affect low-income users
- It is not the library's role to teach responsibility
- A system of fines does not consistently ensure borrowed materials end up back on library shelves (no significant difference in return rates between libraries that charge late fines and those that did not)
- Inherent inequity of no overdue fines on digital materials, only physical ones
- Hitting the "fines cap" severs relationships and ceases use of library; the cost to encourage a patron to return after being denied will be higher than the fines incurred.
- Comparison of overdue fines as a modern day "debtors' tax" akin to payday loans and the bail bonds system (affects those in the least advantageous socioeconomic situations)
- Disproportionately affects children and families -- perhaps a place to start is eliminating fines on youth materials first

- What to do with the perception that with the “saved staff time” from lack of cash collection means an ability to cut positions (libraries long handling increased demand annually with no staff increases, therefore already understaffed, these staff can be redeployed to other duties easily). Staff may be reutilized for other important library functions such as programs, outreach, and more patron beneficial operations.

Technical Aspects

- Eliminating fines in the ILS--material type, patron type
- Frequent and timely automated notices of soon-due materials and overdue materials, as well as very-overdue notices of billing for items
- Revising the policies—are these housed within municipal code, library policy, or elsewhere?
- Strategies for eliminating fines in a consortium setting
- How to address “long overdue” materials in schools/universities at the end of semesters/quarters/graduation

Public Relations Aspects

- Fines create conflict between users and library staff that contributes to negative perceptions of the library as punitive and archaic
- Library use consistently increases in libraries that have eliminated overdue fines
- How to handle announcements/press releases about elimination of fines

Resources List

- Create as a separate file

Appendix 2: FAQ

The American Library Association's position on library fines "asserts that imposition of monetary library fines creates a barrier to the provision of library and information services" (2018-2019 ALA CD#38(Rev.1/27), passed by Council at the 2019 ALA Midwinter Meetings). The association urges libraries to scrutinize their practices of imposing fines on library patrons and actively move towards eliminating them and 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. This FAQ document addresses questions that have arisen from among the membership in relation to the Council debate on the resolution on library fines. The working group hopes that the document will provide clarity and support to libraries and library workers that are considering going fine-free.

1. What exactly is meant by library fines?

- Traditionally, fines are a charge imposed by the library on borrowers who return items past their due date. For our purposes, a **fine** is any monetary penalty assessed against a patron for returning library items after their due date.

2. How does a library fine differ from a library fee?

- A **fee** is a monetary penalty assessed against a patron for damaging or losing library materials, or a fee-for a service such as for making photocopies, test proctoring, etc.

3. Do library fines prevent equitable access to resources and services?

- Research indicates **library fines restrict access to materials and services** while **evidence shows ending library fines results in an increase in patron usage of library resources**.
 - A [2013 study](#) found that low income families avoid the library because of the risk of fines and/or fees from damaged or lost books.
 - [San Francisco](#) eliminated fines, thereby increasing access and library usage.
 - The High Plains Library District ended library fines and circulation increased within six months.
 - Feedback from ASCGLA indicates that for those returning from incarceration, old fines can be a barrier to much-needed library resources.

4. Do library fines disproportionately affect low-income users?

- **Yes.** Data shows **library fines impact lower-income and diverse communities the most**.
 - A San Francisco Public Library white paper showed that most blocked cards are from residents in the lowest median income areas.

- Salt Lake City Public Library found that lower income communities accounted for 14% of overall circulation but had 30% of the blocked accounts.
- [Seattle Public Library](#) is working towards fine elimination after noting branches in affluent, predominantly white neighborhoods had “significantly fewer blocked accounts” in comparison to branches in low-income communities of color.
- [Dallas Public Library’s](#) director of libraries is striving to end library fines to help low-income patrons access resources without having to choose between paying a library fine or buying food, gas, etc.
- Long Beach City College collected data that showed that library fines disproportionately affected African American students, lower income students, and students with disabilities.

5. Are library fines needed in order to teach responsibility?

- There is **no evidence supporting the claim that library fines teach responsibility or accountability.**
 - Even though there is a lack of evidence to this concept, the San Francisco Public Library addressed this issue directly in their white paper and states: “If there is a conflict between teaching responsibility and ensuring equal access, the library is duty bound to prioritize equal access.”
 - [Libraries’ missions](#) include equitable access to information but do not include teaching responsibility. While academic and school libraries may have a teaching mission, it is arguable whether teaching responsibility fits the curriculum that those libraries support.

6. Do library fines motivate people to return borrowed materials?

- **No.** In libraries that have eliminated library fines, **the return rate remained consistent** before and after the change.
 - Vernon Public Library reported the average number of days overdue dropped by 42% **after** eliminating fines

7. How much does it cost libraries to collect late fines?

- In many cases the [overall process for fine collection](#) utilizes more resources than what is collected, and ultimately punishes loyal patrons along with lower income and diverse populations.
 - After analyzing fine collection transactions, the [San Rafael Public Library](#) discovered every transaction used approximately ten minutes of staff time.

- The Vernon Area Public Library District asserts “the cost of staff time to handle overdue fines and of [processing the amounts](#) to more than what they’re earning back from patrons.”
- Executive Director of the Stark County (OH) District Library: “it costs more money in staff time for the tracking, collecting and accounting of the [overdue fines](#) than the \$188,000 the district collects in penalties each year.”

8. Does the revenue created by collecting late fines go back into the library?

- **It depends.** For some libraries, revenue collected through fines and fees does not go back into the library budget but rather to their parent institution’s general fund (county, city, university, school, etc.). For other libraries, revenue collected through fines and fees is an integral part of their budget and a reduction in revenue would result in a direct reduction in budget.

9. What about libraries dependent on revenue generated by collecting late fines?

- Although libraries may not receive funding allowing for the elimination of library fines, **relieving some of the burden created by library fines may increase access and use**, which in turn may result in additional funding.
- There are **transitional strategies** for libraries considering going fine free:
 - Phase out fines over time for certain collections/age groups etc.;
 - [Offer amnesty periods](#);
 - Explore alternatives for generating income; and
 - Use elimination of fines as an opportunity to discuss increased appropriations from library funders. Educate funders that increased funding would eliminate the need for revenue derived from fines and would increase access for the most vulnerable populations in our communities.

10. What are the technical aspects of eliminating library fines from a circulation system?

- Work within the library’s ILS to learn **through which factors you can eliminate fines**. For example, if you are only eliminating fines for youth, can you do that based on birth date or on patron type (juvenile vs. adult)? Which is better for your goals? Are the data points you’re relying on reliable and accurate? What types of manual data entry and changes to records will have to take place to remediate bad data (e.g. missing birth dates, mis-coded “home library” fields)? Consider what the impact on staff time that remediation is likely to have.

11. What does elimination of library fines look like in a consortium?

- Eliminating fines in a consortial environment is necessarily **more complex**, especially if not all members of the consortium are participating. Ideally, the consortium board would vote unanimously to eliminate fines and member libraries could take that decision point back to their parent institutions. If not, the best practice is to try to move as many members together at the same time as possible, allowing time for various parent institution approval processes. At the very least, libraries that are not eliminating fines should have as much lead time as possible to prepare for confused users asking questions about why they are still charging fines.
 - A consideration to investigate if you are part of a consortium is whether you can work in the ILS to eliminate fines only for the users or the materials of a particular member of the consortium. The ILS may require fine elimination to be all or nothing.
 - Another consideration is what to do when members of a fine-free library use materials from a partner library – what role does the fine-free library have in paying late fines for materials routed through them from other libraries?
 - Decisions need to be made on whether to eliminate fines based on materials (as owned by the library in question) or users (as registered with the library in question).

12. How can libraries let people/patrons know about new policies regarding the elimination of fines?

- Libraries can take advantage of social media, local media, and in-facility marketing campaigns.
 - Denver Public Library's efforts provide one model, including the use of direct mail, social media, and website activities.

13. Where can I find more information on eliminating library fines?

- One comprehensive resource that includes news stories, links to readings, a map of libraries that have either fully or partially eliminated fines, and additional information is the End Library Fines site: <https://endlibraryfines.info/>