# DRAFT: Economic Barriers to Information Access: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*

The essential mission of a publicly supported library is to provide free, equal, and equitable access to information for all people in the community, in order to provide the means to each person to become a full participant in our representative government. While the roles, goals, and objectives of publicly supported libraries may differ, they all share this common mission. Just as economic issues may challenge the library’s ability to meet its mission, economic barriers may also threaten user access.

The library’s essential mission must remain the first consideration for those who work in libraries and serve on their governing bodies faced with economic pressures and competition for funding. In support of this mission, the American Library Association has enumerated certain principles of library services in the *Library Bill of Rights* and associated policy statements.

**Principles Governing Fines, Fees, and User Charges**

Article V of the *Library Bill of Rights* states, “A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.”

The “[Resolution on Monetary Library Fines as a Form of Social Inequity](http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/content/governance/council/council_documents/2019_ms_council_docs/ALA%20CD%2038%20RESOLUTION%20ON%20MONETARY%20LIBRARY%20FINES%20AS%20A%20FORM%20OF%20SOCIAL%20JUSTICE%20Revised%201_27_0.pdf)” states that monetary library fines create a barrier to the provision of library and information services.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The American Library Association opposes the charging of user fees for services and resources by publicly funded libraries, including public, school, and academic libraries. All resources provided directly or indirectly by the library, regardless of format or method of delivery, should be readily and equitably accessible to all library users. The imposition of any financial barrier may disadvantage users, including students, and libraries should consider eliminating such barriers that limit access to library resources and other services. However, recovering the cost of lost or stolen materials or willfully damaged assets should not be considered a violation of this principle.

Libraries that adhere to these principles systematically monitor their programs and services for potential barriers to access and strive to eliminate them when they occur. Libraries should design and implement services with care so as not to infringe upon access to or delivery of information and resources for all users. Services should be reevaluated regularly to ensure that the library’s essential mission remains uncompromised.

Libraries should examine all policies and procedures, particularly those involving fines, fees, or other user charges, and actively move toward eliminating any that may create potential barriers to access or academic achievement. If a library charges the user any fees, it should consider waiving or reducing them, at its discretion, based on that user’s ability to pay.

Economic barriers are not limited solely to financial constraints and a user’s ability to pay fines or fees. Many policies and procedures, such as those regarding personal belongings, hygiene requirements, or ID verification, may disproportionately harm those experiencing financial difficulties, especially those experiencing homelessness or those from marginalized communities. Such policies and procedures effectively abridge or deny access for some members of the community because they reinforce distinctions among users.

Libraries and their governing bodies should look for alternative models and methods of administration that minimize distinctions among users based on their economic status. They should resist imposing user fees to alleviate financial pressures on the library, as those fees may impose a long-term cost to institutional integrity and public confidence in libraries. Likewise, they should not enact policies that cater to the desires of the economically fortunate at the expense of the economically unfortunate.

**Principles Governing Conditions of Funding**

The American Library Association opposes any legislative or regulatory attempt to impose content restrictions on library resources or to limit user access to resources or services as a condition of funding publicly supported libraries and information services.

Libraries and their governing bodies should carefully examine any terms or conditions attached to library funding and should oppose conditions that might limit full and equal access to content. This principle applies equally to private gifts or bequests and to public funds. In particular, libraries and their governing bodies have an obligation to reject such restrictions when the effect of the restriction is to limit equal and equitable access to information.

Libraries and their governing bodies should cooperate with all efforts to create a community consensus that publicly supported libraries require funding unfettered by conditions that limit full and equal access to content. Such a consensus supports the library mission to provide the free and unrestricted exchange of information and ideas.

Adopted June 30, 1993, by the ALA Council. Revisions proposed for ALA Annual Conference 2019.

1. “[Resolution on Monetary Library Fines as a Form of Social Inequity](http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/content/governance/council/council_documents/2019_ms_council_docs/ALA%20CD%2038%20RESOLUTION%20ON%20MONETARY%20LIBRARY%20FINES%20AS%20A%20FORM%20OF%20SOCIAL%20JUSTICE%20Revised%201_27_0.pdf),” adopted by ALA Council January 28, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)