

## **Resolution in Opposition to Charging Prisoners to Read**

**Whereas**, the Prisoners' Right to Read: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights declares that "equitable access to information should be provided for people with disabilities" and "The denial of intellectual freedom—the right to read, to write, and to think—diminishes the human spirit of those segregated from society" and

**Whereas**, the Access to Library Resources and Services document articulates the importance of providing access to resources to every member of the community, particularly in light of existing socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and other inequities, many of which are exacerbated by the penal system, and

**Whereas**, people in West Virginia prisons will be charged 3-5 cents/minute to access "free" books on e-readers following similar for-profit programs that exist in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and other states, and

**Whereas**, these per-minute charges are particularly unfair to imprisoned people who are emergent readers or who have print disabilities like dyslexia or low vision, and

**Whereas**, these charges mean that the average cost of reading a single "free" book such as *1984* is close to \$20, while imprisoned people's wages, if any are paid, are less than \$1 per day, and

**Whereas**, these for-profit programs are provided access to prison space and resources, which could instead be used for libraries and the free services they provide, including services that promote increased access to higher education programs, which have been proven to help reduce recidivism,  
*now therefore be it*

**Resolved**, that the American Library Association (ALA), on behalf of its members:

1. Condemns the existence of for-profit programs that charge incarcerated people for access to reading material, acknowledging such programs only serve to deepen existing inequities barring free access to information for all people.
2. Strongly encourages all library workers, particularly those in states with for-profit prison reading programs, to contact their state legislatures to express their concern over the denial of access to information these programs pose to incarcerated people.

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Additional issues not specifically addressed in the wording of the resolution include:

Once security is threatened, everyone loses access to for-profit tablets, which happened in Colorado: <https://www.denverpost.com/2018/08/01/colorado-inmate-tablets/>.

At which point the ability to read is then in danger of being revoked for all if the tablets are the only way to access reading material.

Studies show that more than 60% of those incarcerated are functionally illiterate:

<https://www.begintoread.com/research/literacystatistics.html>

Paying by the minute to read further penalizes and disincentivizes a skill that is directly linked to life success, especially relevant when recidivism nationwide is 68% within 3 years of release and 83% within 9 years <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/18upr9yfup0514.pdf>

When these for-profit programs replace facility libraries or public library services to facilities, they limit access to the most needed materials, including:

- High-interest, low-literacy titles that appeal to and help readers improve their skills
- Current nonfiction on any topic, but particularly necessary ones like health, careers and skill development, religious texts, etc.
- Diverse books by non-white authors (and 56% of the incarcerated are African-American and Hispanic - <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>)
- A strong variety of materials in languages other than English, particularly Spanish (the most common language after English - <http://critcrim.org/esl-in-corrections.htm>)
- Accessible options for the print-disabled

Tablets-only policies have been proposed very recently. Pennsylvania quickly reversed its decision, but only because of public pressure: <https://slate.com/technology/2018/09/pennsylvania-prisons-ban-book-donations-ebooks.html>

The profit making companies have no mechanisms to appeal censorship, and no reason to provide access to subjects that have even a hint of controversy (like LGBTQ+ information or popular but disputed genres like urban fiction). Having reading materials only accessible through a vendor is an intellectual freedom issue.

There is also no privacy for readers, because it's in the vendor's interest to provide any and all information that corrections officials ask for.

References removed at the request of the Resolutions Committee

<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/prisonersrightoread>

<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/access>

<https://reason.com/2019/11/22/west-virginia-inmates-will-be-charged-by-the-minute-to-read-e-books-on-tablets/>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/incarcerated-pennsylvanians-now-have-to-pay-150-to-read-we-should-all-be-outraged/2018/10/11/51f548b8-cbd9-11e8-a85c-0bbe30c19e8f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/incarcerated-pennsylvanians-now-have-to-pay-150-to-read-we-should-all-be-outraged/2018/10/11/51f548b8-cbd9-11e8-a85c-0bbe30c19e8f_story.html)

<https://www.begintoread.com/research/literacystatistics.html>

<https://appalachianprisonbookproject.org/2019/11/20/how-much-does-it-cost-to-read-a-free-book-on-a-free-tablet/>

<http://harvardpolitics.com/covers/covers-spring-2015/stop-revolving-prison-doors-books/>