

Recommendation to Eliminate Overdue Fines

Presented to the WCCLS Executive Board July 2020

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Introduction

At the May 2020 Executive Board meeting, many representatives shared their support for no overdue fines for library materials to support equity goals and asked for more information to support a future Executive Board discussion. This document is intended to support that discussion.

Public libraries historically assessed overdue fines in order to incentivize the timely return of library materials. However, there is no current data that shows overdue fines achieve this goal; in fact, overdue fines are counterproductive and keep users away from the library. Evidence from the past decade shows that eliminating overdue fines reduces barriers to library usage for historically underserved communities, results in an increase in the return of long overdue materials and frees up staff time for more positive interactions with library users.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed inequalities in our communities. [Washington County has a 14% unemployment rate](#), our communities of color are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, and families face an extremely challenging school year ahead. Public libraries play a critical role in the well-being and education of our communities, and public library service should be accessible to everyone, especially now. Eliminating overdue fines is a significant action that would demonstrate our commitment to service, access and equity.

This document outlines WCCLS and member library directors' recommendation that the WCCLS Executive Board agree to eliminate overdue fines for all Washington County library users.

Respectfully,

Lisa Tattersall, WCCLS	Molly Carlisle, Garden Home Community Library
Terri Palmer, Aloha Community Library	Karen Muller, Hillsboro Public Library
Denise Holmes, Banks Public Library	Robin Doughty, North Plains Public Library
Glenn Ferdman, Beaverton City Library	Adrienne Doman Calkins, Sherwood Public Library
Peter Leonard, Cedar Mill Community Libraries	Halsted Bernard, Tigard Public Library
Karen Hill, Cornelius Public Library	Jerianne Thompson, Tualatin Public Library
Colleen Winters, Forest Grove City Library	Kristen Thorp, West Slope Community Library

Equity and WCCLS' Strategic Plan

In our [recent racial justice statement](#), WCCLS stated that we are “committed to the Washington County’s Board of Commissioners’ resolution ‘to [dismantle] long-standing systems, programs, policies and practices that may have historically created obstacles to the success of people of color, members of ethnic communities and any marginalized group.’ WCCLS’ strategic vision for Washington County is a curious, engaged, and literate community where everyone is welcome and thrives.... We are committed to making progress on our strategic plan objective of increasing participation by underserved populations by reducing barriers to access.”

Eliminating overdue fines is an evidence-based way to reduce one significant barrier to library access. According to the [Urban Libraries Council](#), “[r]esearch shows that communities of color are more likely to be impacted by unpaid library fees and are grappling with a higher percentage of suspended library cards. This is a growing concern for many municipal leaders who want better ways to engage and support community residents.

Overdue library fees often represent a very small fraction of a library’s operating budget, yet disproportionately affect communities that have income insecurity or individuals with low incomes. Late fees add up and become insurmountable for some families when forced to choose between paying the fee or buying food. For many, this is a reminder of past injustices within public institutions.”

Literature Review¹



Map of fine-free libraries in the continental U.S. Retrieved July 09, 2020, from <https://endlibraryfines.info/fine-free-library-map/>

Our neighboring library system in Multnomah County eliminated overdue fines in July 2020. Fort Vancouver Regional Library District went fine free in 1970 after an internal study that showed the cost of collecting fines did not outweigh the amount of revenue collected.

Peter Bromberg, Executive Director of the Salt Lake City Public Library, says that [since going fine-free in 2017](#), the library has seen a rise in the number of new patrons (3.5%) and a

higher number of borrowed books (10%).

This section answers some of the common questions raised about going fine-free from the professional literature and experiences of public libraries across the country.

Will patrons return library materials on time without fines?

- Chicago Public Library saw a 240% increase in returned books in the month after they eliminated fines in September of 2019.
- Salt Lake City's Public Library saw late returns drop from 9% to 4% after fines were eliminated.

Will patrons practice civic responsibility if we eliminate fines?

- In fine-free libraries, patrons are responsible to return materials, and will have to pay for them if they are lost or damaged.
- According to the High Plains Library District in northern Colorado, which eliminated fines in 2015, "the fear that fines were the only thing between civilization and chaos has proved unfounded: 95 percent of materials are returned within a week of their due date."
- "Fines have become a privilege and — not only do they not work — they actually encourage people to keep materials longer if they can afford it. If you can afford it, you pay your fines, you don't feel guilty and you support the library. We love people to support the library. We don't love that it was a privilege and that people who couldn't afford fines stopped using the library altogether." - Annette Birdsall, Director of the Tompkins County Public Library
- "Overdue fines do not turn irresponsible patrons into responsible ones, they only distinguish between patrons who can afford to pay for the common mistake of late returns and those who cannot." ([San Francisco Public Library white paper](#))

How do fines affect lower-income and historically underserved patrons?

- In San Francisco, "patrons across all branches accrue fines at similar rates, but locations serving low-income areas have higher average debt amounts and more blocked users."
- "For middle-class patrons, [fines] may feel like a slap on the wrist, or even a feel-good donation, but not everyone shares that privilege." ([Slate magazine article](#))

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all information in this summary is quoted or cited from this resource published April 2020: Unrein, Sabrina. (2020). "[Overdue Fines: Advantages, Disadvantages, and How Eliminating Them Can Benefit Public Libraries.](#)" Syracuse, NY: iSchool Public Libraries Initiative at Syracuse University.

- In Seattle, “the branches with the highest proportion of accounts blocked for overdue fines are all in parts of Seattle that are both poorer and more diverse than the city as a whole.”
- Prior to New York City’s fine forgiveness program, according to NYPL’s CEO, “20% of our 400,000 juvenile and young adult patrons had blocked library cards; nearly half of those were concentrated in the poorest quartile of our branches.”
- [American Library Association’s resolution on monetary library fines as a form of social inequity](#)

How do fines affect a library’s relationship with their patrons and staff morale?

- “Not spending dollars to collect dimes.” - Nancy Kreiser from the Contra Costa County Library
- Libraries who charge fines “decide to take the ‘enforcer or tax collector role,’ potentially at the detriment of library usage in general.” ([Journal of Academic Librarianship article](#))
- “Overdue fines are a regressive method of raising revenue, they hurt the most those who can afford them the least, create stress-filled interactions, and require significant amounts of staff time to manage.” - David Seleb from the Oak Park Public Library
- According to Randall Goble from the Kent District Library, “the library spent an estimated \$150k of our payroll dollars on staff time dealing with fines (either collecting the payment or manually waiving them). This staff time could be better focused on providing excellent, positive library service, instead of on negative interactions around fines.”
- In San Diego, [officials calculated that it actually would be saving money](#) if its librarians stopped tracking down patrons to recover books. The city had spent nearly \$1 million to collect \$675,000 in library fees each year.
- [The Denver Post](#) reports that after the Denver Public Library got rid of library fines, residents are returning to the library, with 35 percent of patrons who’d had overdue fines now re-engaging.

Further watching and reading

- Wacek, Dawn. (2018, February). [TED Talk: A Librarian's Case Against Overdue Book Fines](#) (14 minutes)
- Cisneros, J. (2019). [LONG OVERDUE: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library](#). The Office of the Treasurer and Tax Collector.
- Holson, L. M. (2020, February 23). [More Libraries Are Doing Away with Overdue Fines](#). The New York Times.

Fine-Free Implementation at WCCLS

These statements were agreed to by WCCLS and all member libraries in a series of discussions in early July 2020. Due to COVID-19, library patrons will not be assessed any fines through September 30.

Values for the discussion

- We have fees only to encourage the return or replacement of library material.
- We do not use fines and fees to punish library users.

Overdue fines

- No overdue fines will be charged starting [implementation date].
- Existing overdue fines on patron accounts will be deleted on [implementation date].

Processing fees

- *Processing fees are a legacy fee and no longer assessed.*

- Processing fees remaining on accounts will be deleted on [implementation date].

Replacement fees for lost materials

- Replacement fees will continue to be charged.
- Existing replacement fees will *not* be deleted on [implementation date].
- If a lost item is returned in circulating condition, the replacement charge will be removed from the patron's account.

Use of collection agency to encourage the return of long-overdue materials

Important note: collection agency activity for library materials does not impact patrons' credit reports

- Libraries will continue to use collection agency to encourage the return of library materials
- We will increase the threshold at which an account is sent to collections from \$50 to \$100
- We will not pass on the collection agency fee to patrons; libraries will absorb the cost
- Libraries can work with patrons before they are sent to collections, preventing many/most patrons from ever getting contacted if they choose
- We will reevaluate the cooperative use of a collection agency to encourage the return of library materials in one year

Fiscal Impact

At the countywide level, 111,487 people would have \$1,481,920.52 in fees waived from their accounts. This would allow 12,200 people to be able to once again access library services. An additional 11,832 people would continue to be blocked from access, due to replacement charges over \$20 on their accounts. Libraries have committed to working with these still blocked patrons in a proactive and positive way to resolve their accounts, keeping equity principles in mind. Our work to ensure equitable access to libraries is on-going and does not end with this initiative.

A detailed breakdown of these amounts for each member library is in the spreadsheet attached.

With the growth of digital lending (digital books are fine-free) and the elimination of fines on youth materials in 2017, overdue fine revenue has already been shrinking over the past few years. In addition, what fines/fees are assessed is not the same amount as what is collected. For example, 75% of overdue fines that were assessed countywide in FY19-20 were actually collected. Just 7% of replacement fees that were assessed countywide in FY19-20 were actually collected.

Communication Plan

Assuming this recommendation is adopted by the Executive Board and the County's Board of Commissioners, WCCLS will take the lead on communication at the cooperative level. We'll develop a bilingual English/Spanish public communication plan, which will include at least:

- Information and FAQs on wccls.org, including alert banner at the top of the page
- Mass email newsletter to all library cardholders
- "Welcome back" emails to patrons who were previously blocked but are no longer
- Press release and outreach to local reporters
- Social media posts (with paid promotion)
- Consistent communication assets for libraries to use (graphics and messaging)

- Working with individual libraries to determine if additional targeted communication to specific communities or language groups is needed

We will also create support materials and information for library staff including timeline, staff-specific FAQs, etc.

Centralized Online Fine Payment Revenue Distribution

WCCLS proposes to distribute to libraries all revenue that has been collected by WCCLS using the [cooperative-wide online payment portal](#) after we recover the cost to provide the service. This distribution will help offset the loss in fine revenue that may have been budgeted for locally in FY20-21.

From October 1, 2018 through June 30, 2020, WCCLS collected \$84,6990.32 in gross revenue online. The online fine payment service for that time period cost WCCLS \$14,272.69 to deliver. See the spreadsheet attached for detailed distribution amounts. Revenue for each library was determined by which library the patron was registered with at the time they paid the fine.

In July 2021, library directors will look at revenue collected centrally by WCCLS during FY20-21, decide whether the amount merits another distribution and bring a recommendation to the Executive Board.

Next Steps

Executive Board:

- Make decision on this recommendation at your next meeting

County Board of Commissioners:

- WCCLS staff brings Executive Board recommendation to the Board of Commissioners, as well as the online fine payment revenue distribution

Implementation tasks for WCCLS

- Coordinate library director conversation about various related system settings that need to be agreed-upon by [implementation date]
- Work with integrated library system vendor to waive fees
- Adjust system-wide software settings
- Develop and implement public communication campaign
- Build information and resources for library staff support, including updating policies/procedures