

Going Fine Free
Kennebunk Free Library
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INTRODUCTION

The fine-free libraries movement is relatively new, having been brought into the spotlight in 2015 following the publication Meg Johnson Depriest's white paper "Removing Barriers to Access: Eliminating Fines and Fees on Children's Materials." It has gained steady momentum across libraries of all sizes and types, both urban and rural. In fact, a Library Journal review in 2017 discussing libraries considering going fine-free and showing a small percentage that had already made the leap had a follow up article only a year later stating that the numbers found in their initial survey are already rapidly changing in the direction of more libraries going fine-free (Dixon, 2017 & Peet, 2018). While formal studies remain few and far between, qualitative data is amassing which illustrates that removal of fines has not had significant impact on material returns or overdues, circulation has remained steady or improved, library access and membership has remained steady or improved, interactions between staff and patrons have improved, conflict over fines has reduced, and impacts on budgets have generally been absorbed or mitigated.

The main concerns around fine removal tend to fall into three categories: effect on materials being returned on time/going missing, revenue, and instilling patron responsibility. Each of these will be addressed below.

OVERDUES & RETURNS

The vast majority of libraries of all sizes and types that have gone fine-free report that the impact of overdues and returned items has been negligible to slightly positive. Two larger surveys of fine-free libraries, Sam Cook's Fine Free Policies report and the San Francisco Public Library's Long Overdue report, both found that libraries typically did not experience increases in overdue items or in items never being returned. Most libraries reported an increase in on-time returns, with more items returned before their due dates than before the policy switch. Long Overdue identifies one library system that saw a full 5% decrease in overdue items after switching to being fine free. Others reported a significant drop in patrons going into collections status (Peet, 2018).

As Depriest and others note, this is likely due to patrons returning items that they may have otherwise kept for fear of receiving fines they are unable to pay. Depriest's findings illustrate that fines are a deterrent for many library users. Fines may drive patrons away from ever trying to use the library and deter people from returning items once they have amassed fines they cannot pay. This results in more overdues and more unreturned items that then need full replacement.

BUDGET & REVENUE

In her article, Peet notes that overdue fines account for an average of 1% or less of budgeted revenues across libraries of all types and sizes. When comparing the cost of levying and processing late fees with the revenue generated, most libraries saw that the numbers were nearly equal or, in some cases, that they were spending more to collect fines than they were making from them.

In cases where staff processing and accounting time did not equate to the amount fines brought in, most libraries were able to make-up the shortfall using methods such as “guilt jars”- jars set out for patrons to donate to when returning late items, broader appeals for donations, additional fundraising, leveraging fees for other services such as raising out of town account fees and adjusting copying/printing/faxing charges (Cook, 2018). Some libraries chose to allow fees to accrue on a patron’s account which would still be waived. When the patron checked out items, staff would let them know the amount on their account, tell them they would waive the fee but ask if they would like to make it a donation instead. The Orange Beach Public Library in Alabama took this approach and found it worked well for the initial period, but participation decreased once novelty wore off (Gillis, 2017). Others have taken a “pay what you like” hybrid approach which sees a donation box on the desk that patrons can choose any amount to put in to cover any fines they may have which are then waived, even if the person cannot contribute to the box (Cook, 2018). Donation jars and adjustments to budgets to absorb small losses appear to be the most common practice thus far (Dixon, 2017 & Cook, 2018).

PATRON RESPONSIBILITY

The argument that overdue fines teach patrons to be responsible and return their items on time has no empirical evidence proving it to be true (SFPL, 2019). Rather than deter late returns, fines deter entire participation in and use of the library by vulnerable community members (Depriest, 2015). As previously discussed data shows, overdues typically went down and return rates increased with the removal of fines, suggesting that fines are not an effective tool for teaching responsibility. Further, a broader question of if the library should be in the position to act in loco parentis at all has been brought up by libraries considering the change to fine-free (Peet, 2018). Marianne Ryan with the UMass Law Library wrote in her 2017 article that being fine-free did not reduce the expectation of responsibility by the library’s users. Rather, it was maintained through community social standards and general reciprocity of goodwill. Increased goodwill and respect were also noted by Gillis in his account of his library’s fine-free pilot period. As an added bonus, many libraries reported an improvement of staff-patron relations and an increase of satisfaction with library experiences when fines were removed from the interaction equation. Building a reciprocal sense of goodwill and support and moving from “punitive to altruistic” interactions may translate to broader support of the library as a whole (Gillis, 2017).

Going fine-free does not indicate the abdication of responsibility for patrons. Almost all fine-free libraries still levy replacement fees for lost, damaged, and excessively late items. Most also revoke

borrowing privileges on cards that have severely overdue items. Borrowing blocks are released once the item is returned (Peet, 2018). Service and monetary incentives do not disappear in a fine-free model, but are assessed less frequently and given with a broader benefit of the doubt.

ACCESS AND EQUITY

All of the sources attached will describe that fines present a barrier to access in the library, particularly for low income people and people of color. In 2019, the American Library Association passed a resolution declaring monetary library fines to be a form of social inequity. The primary goal in moving to a fine-free model is to increase access and maintain access to library materials. Depriest illustrated that fines do indeed keep people from using the library. Fines may be levied equally, but they are not levied equitably. A \$10 payment may be no trouble for some, but may have serious repercussions and prove a large burden for others (Depriest, 2015).

Libraries that have moved to fine-free models have noted increases in both circulation numbers as well as card sign-ups (Cook, 2018 & SFPL, 2019). Anecdotal evidence abounds of people returning to libraries years after they stopped visiting due to owed fines. Librarians report a decrease in the “drop and run” return of very overdue items, giving librarians a chance to reconnect with patrons and offer more services (Ryan, 2017). One librarian reported a 50% increase in new card signups at her library in the first year of being fine-free (Peet, 2018). Other libraries also saw increases in card signups, though generally much more modest growth. Circulation numbers increased, particularly for children’s items at many libraries (Cook, 2018).

KENNEBUNK FREE LIBRARY PATRONS & SERVICE AREA

Please see the Community Profile in KFL’s Strategic Plan for data on our service population, cardholders, and community demographics.

In addition to the information found in the Community Profile, note the following data on RSU 21’s Free & Reduced Lunch eligibility for Fiscal Year 2021:

2,535 enrolled students.

506 Eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch = 19.96% eligible. Of those, 15.54% eligible for free lunch, 4.42% eligible for reduced lunch.

Source:

<https://neo.maine.gov/DOE/neo/Nutrition/Reports/NutritionReports.aspx?reportPath=ED534byCounty>

As the Community Profile notes, approximately 12% of the population lives on less than \$24,999 per year. Nearly 20% of our school population meets criteria for Free & Reduced Lunch. These percentages

are quite a bit lower than the state average, but they are not to be overlooked. In discussions of access and equity, we must recognize that though our community is generally more affluent than others nearby, we have populations that are experiencing financial difficulties and burdens.

Anecdotal observations from staff regarding fines:

There is a disproportionate burden of fines on lower income patrons. We do see this on a regular basis. While we have patrons who round up their fines, pay a little extra, throw something into the donation box in addition to their fines, we also regularly have patrons who struggle to pay when they hit the \$5 limit, scrounge for change to get just below \$5 while leaving the rest of the balance, are preoccupied with renewal dates based around their schedules to avoid fines, not to mention the behavior/emotional challenges when these patrons are asked to pay- they are often quite embarrassed, lower their voices, are overly apologetic, and generally give off the feeling of wrongdoing simply because they cannot come up with \$5-\$10 on the spot. This is certainly exacerbated by having the conversation and transaction in the middle of the open circulation space, and moreso if other patrons are waiting behind them. Also, we typically offer a half off fines promotion during National Library Week. Throughout the year when reporting fines to patrons we will get asked when that week will occur. They would rather wait to pay then than on the spot. If that week is months away, we lose that patron for quite some time.

KFL FINES REVENUE & COSTS

For FY2020-2021 KFL has a projected revenue of \$8,000 from overdue fines. This represents 0.96% of the total budgeted revenue for the year, directly in line with the national average.

Costs for levying and processing fines:

Staff time: Average of 30 seconds per cash transaction, more if card payment is made or patron engages a discussion/negotiation (Cook, 2018).

Plus running notices, mailing, accounting, reminder calls.

Stamps: Average of 5 letters sent per day at .55/stamp = \$2.75/day. Sent 6 days a week = \$858.00/year.

Card processing: KFL allows patrons to pay with a card. As payment is not enforced until a patron accrues \$5, cards are often used instead of cash. The processing fee for card transactions is _____

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San Francisco Public Library. *Long Overdue: Eliminating Fines on Overdue Material to Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library*. January 2019.

*****The Executive Summary and Projecting the Impact are particularly useful sections, as is information regarding removal concerns on page 6.**

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West, Nancy Shohet. *Late? No, fine*. March 25, 2012. http://archive.boston.com/news/local/articles/2012/03/25/some_greater_boston_libraries_are_droppi ng_fines_for_overdue_materials/?page=2. Last accessed 8/13/2020.

*****A number of other newspaper articles were reviewed. A vast majority of them are covered within the cited sources and not repeated here.**