

ATTACHMENT E

APPROVAL TO BECOME A FINE FREE LIBRARY

We are asking to the Board to consider becoming a fine free library. The fine free trend has become the norm as many libraries in Illinois and nationwide have embraced this policy.

Library	Date Fine Free	Automatic Renewals	Notes
Algonquin Area Library	Sep-14		
Vernon Area Library	Aug-15		
Ela Area Library	Sep-15		
Wood Dale Public Library	Jan-16	yes	
Addison Public Library	Nov-16	no	
Aurora Public Library	Jan-17	yes	Youth Only
Oak Park Public Library	Jun-17		
Glenside Public Library	Mar-18	no	
Fremont Public Library	Apr-18		
Lansing Public Library	May-18		
Warren-Newport Library	Jan-19		
River Forest Public Library	Apr-19		
Skokie Public Library	Apr-19		Youth material only
Chicago Public Library	Sep-19	15 renewals	
La Grange Public Library	Sep-19	yes	
Effingham Public Library	Oct-19		
Glen Ellyn	Jan-20	yes	
Warrenville Library	Jan-20	yes	
Oregon PL	Jan-20		
Joliet	Aug-20		
Palatine	Aug-20		
Fondulac	Sep-20		
Lisle	Sep-20		
Barrington	Sep-20		
Chicago Ridge	Sep-20		
Clarendon Hills	soon		
Northlake	Aug-20		
Plainfield	Sep-20		
Des Plaines	soon		
Downers Grove	Apr-20		
Bloomington	Jul-05		
Deerfield	Dec-20		
Schaumburg	Apr-20		
Gail Borden	Apr-20		No LOET and video games
Elk Grove Village	Jun-20		
Evanston	May-20		
AHPLD	Jan 1 2021		
Naperville	June 1 2021		
Cook	Apr-21		
Green Hills	Apr-21		
Forest Park	May-21		

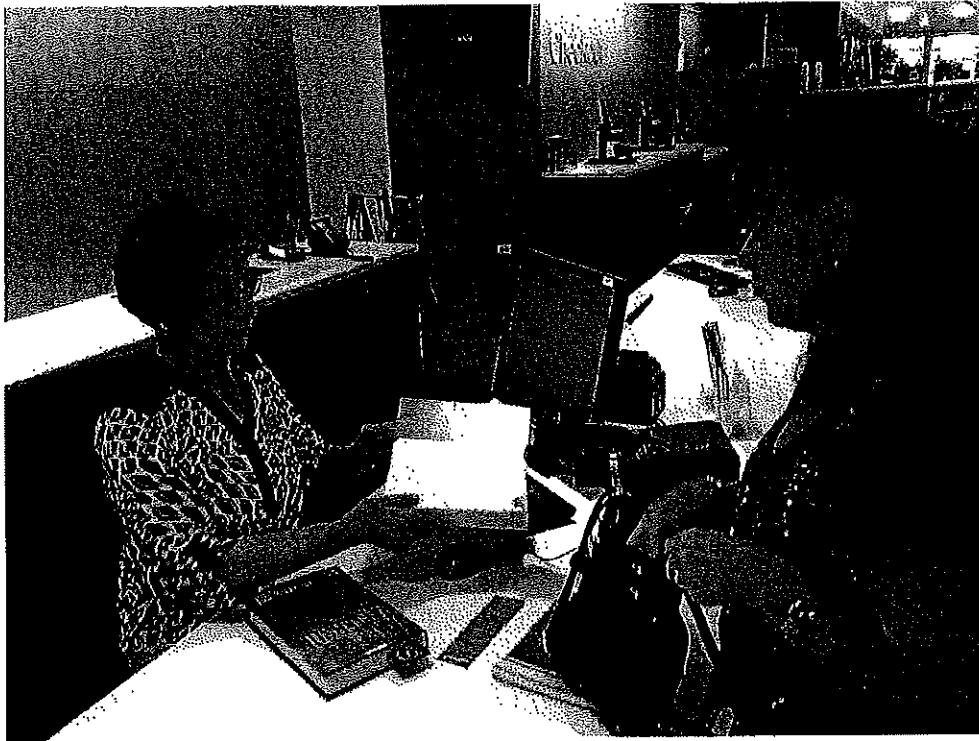
## FINE FREE

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- **What does *Fine Free* mean?**  
*Fine Free* is a trend in libraries to eliminate overdue fines for library items that are returned late.
- **Why are libraries going *Fine Free*?**
  - Overdue fines create financial barriers to public library use.
  - Fines make up relatively small amount of overall budget; under 1%.
  - Eliminating fines reduces the amount of negative interactions between staff and patrons.
  - Overdue fines have not been found to incentivize the return of library material.
- **How does it work?**
  - Fine Free does not mean no responsibility.
  - Items still have due dates, and patrons are blocked from further checkouts if items are not returned within a designated time period (most libraries set this at 2 weeks overdue).
  - Once the items are returned or renewed, the block on the card is removed.
  - Patron accounts with material that is over a month overdue are turned over to a Collection Agency and are assessed a \$10 fee.
- **What has been the experience of the libraries that have gone *Fine Free*?**
  - Decreased revenue
  - No noticeable increase in holds wait time
  - Increased customer and staff satisfaction
  - Brought back patrons who had old, outstanding fines
- **Which area libraries are *Fine Free*?**
  - Algonquin Area Library (Since September 2014)  
*"good will and positive customer service far outweigh the loss of income"* – Algonquin Area Public Library
  - Vernon Area Public Library (Since August 2015)  
*"material returned on average 8 days earlier"* – Vernon Area Public Library
  - Elia Area Library (Since September 2015)  
*"Happiness skyrocketed"* – Elia Area Public Library
  - Addison Public Library (Since November 2016)  
*"We do not want to punish our patrons or ever make them feel unwelcome"* – Addison Public Library
  - Wood Dale Public Library (Since 2016)
  - Oak Park Public Library (Since June 2017)  
*"Imposing (fines) is contrary to why we exist and what we do: sharing the information, services, and opportunities that fulfill Oak Park's aspirations."* – Oak Park Public Library
  - Fremont Public Library (expected date April 2018)
  - River Forest Public Library (expected date FY 2019/2020)

News | updated: 8/11/2015 5:38 PM

# All are forgiven: Vernon Area library halts fines for overdue books



**Vernon Area Public Library employee Christa Wells checks out some books for patron Michele Meyer on Tuesday. Starting this week, overdue materials no longer will generate fines.**

*Russell Lissau | Staff Photographer*



**Russell Lissau**

Saying penalizing people for borrowing items isn't a friendly policy, officials at a library in southern Lake County have broken with industry tradition and done away with fines for overdue books and other materials.

As part of the new philosophy, the Vernon Area Public Library in Lincolnshire also erased nearly \$43,000 in outstanding fines that had been accrued by more than 8,400 customers.

Everyone with a Vernon Area library card now has a clean account, regardless of past infractions, spokeswoman Catherine Savage said.

"Punishing people for using the library is not in line with what we want to be doing for our patrons," Savage said. "They're all free and clear now."

But patrons will now receive bills to replace books and other material once they're overdue by two weeks -- and they still won't pay if they simply return the material.

When it launched the policy this week, Vernon Area became one of the few libraries in the Northwest suburbs to eliminate overdue fines. The Algonquin Area Public Library was the first, taking the leap in September 2014.

The Elmhurst Area Public Library in Lake Zurich is next. Officials there plan to eliminate assessing late fees starting Sept. 2.

Select libraries in Ohio, Missouri, Massachusetts, Colorado and other states have eliminated fines, too.

Sari Feldman, president of the American Library Association, acknowledged that fines and fees can be barriers preventing people -- especially poorer people -- from using library services.

And as libraries become places people turn to not just for books but also for community events, job-search assistance and other programs, finding ways to reduce those barriers is important, she said.

"Public libraries are in the process of transformation, and we increasingly recognize that we are less about what we have for people and more about what we do for and with people," Feldman said.

At Vernon Area, fines for most overdue materials had been 10 cents per day. Fines for DVDs, video games and some other popular materials were \$1 a day.

Fines generated about \$35,000 for Vernon Area in 2014, Savage said. That's a lot of dimes, but it amounted to less than 1 percent of the district's annual budget.

And the manpower needed to answer questions about fines and process them wasn't worth the money coming in, Savage said.

Through research done earlier this year, officials also discovered late fees didn't encourage people to return books and videos on time.

"People bring things back because they're done with them," Savage said. "Or they bring them back because they're due."

Instead of being assessed relatively minuscule daily fines, patrons who don't return items will be billed for their replacement cost.

Bills will be sent to patrons for items two weeks overdue, Savage said. If an item is then returned promptly, charges won't be assessed.

If the item hasn't been returned within 35 days of the original due date, the bill moves to an independent debt-collection agency, Savage said.

At the Algonquin library, that's resulted in about \$57,000 in recovered replacement costs and fees since officials eliminated overdue fines, Executive Director Stephen Bero said.

Vernon Area patron Scott Stoga supports the new approach. He thinks it will put more pressure on customers -- especially parents of young readers -- to bring books back.

"Buying a new book is a lot more (expensive) than 10 cents a day," said Stoga, of Deerfield.

As the Algonquin library's no-fine policy nears its anniversary, Bero said the response remains positive.

"It's one less thing for us to worry about, and patrons like it (because) they're not being bugged," he said.

Eliminating fines has cost the library some revenue, but that's been offset by increased goodwill in the community, Bero said.

Vernon Area's Savage hopes her library experiences a similar public-relations boost. They've promoted the change on the library's website, on social media and in a freshly published newsletter.

"So far, people are very surprised and equally pleased," Savage said.

December 2015 | Volume XXXIII, Issue 6 »

## Fine (Free) and Dandy: Libraries Say Good-bye to Overdue Charges

November 30, 2015

Kara Kohn, Plainfield Public Library District

In an episode of the TV series *Seinfeld* entitled "The Library," Jerry receives a letter from the New York Public Library

about an overdue book from the early 1970s. He is positive the book was returned, and when he goes to the library to sort it out, the librarian tells him, "Oh, *Tropic of Cancer*, Henry Miller. Uh, this case has been turned over to our library investigation officer, Lt. Bookman."

By the end of the episode, Jerry realizes he hadn't actually returned the book, heads back to the library to pay the fine. When Jerry says that he hopes there are no hard feelings and asks what the problem is, Bookman responds, "What's my problem? Punks like you, that's my problem. And you better not screw up again *Seinfeld*, because if you do, I'll be all over you like a pit bull on a poodle."

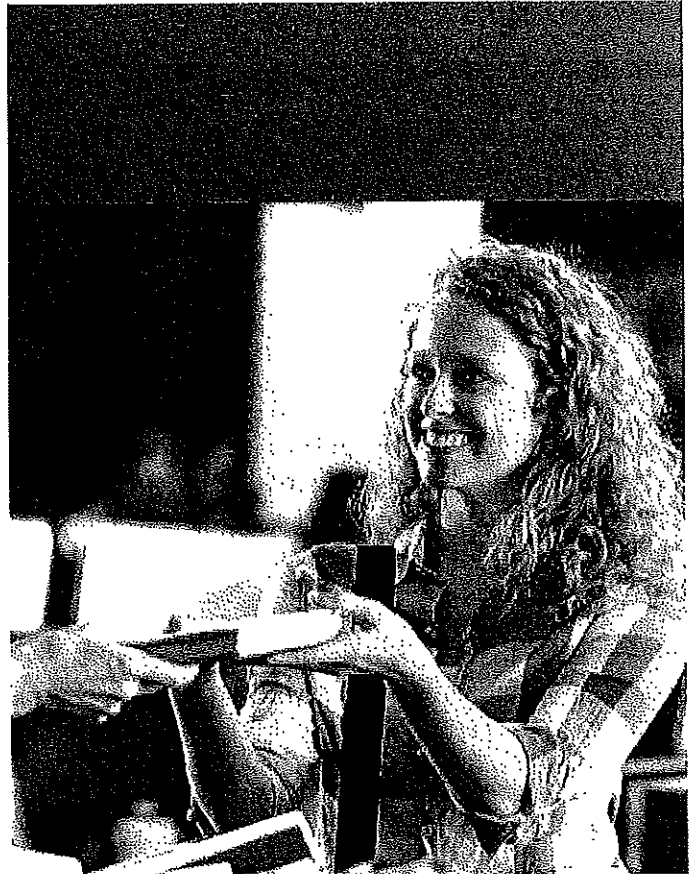
Of course, there is no library who employs a kick-butt-and-take-names-type like Lt. Bookman just to get their overdue materials returned. However, some of our patrons will think exactly that: one simple transgression such as returning materials a few days late leaves you embarrassed and financially culpable. Who would want to return to such a place?

There is no question that libraries need to be responsible for the collection, insure that holds are being filled in a timely manner, and act as good stewards of taxpayer dollars. But sometimes the overzealousness that we apply to materials is a detriment to customer service. Eliminating fines at libraries has been a lively topic on e-mail lists. We spoke with four libraries who took that fine-free plunge.

### Start the conversation

Creating financial barriers to public library use is counterproductive and goes against the library's mission to encourage more use, not less. So after a three-year discussion, Elmhurst Area Public Library District Director Matt Womack approached his management staff, who enthusiastically supported the notion of eliminating fines, especially after opportunities to play devil's advocate to weigh pros and cons.

Getting staff on board was only half the equation, as final approval for a change of this scope rested with the board of trustees. The board was first asked to consider the notion without making a decision and given ample time to discuss. When it was time to vote two years later, the board had already weighed both the positive and negative outcomes and were ready to come to a decision.



In another Chicago suburb, the former library director of Algonquin Area Public Library District approached Access Services Administrator Gary Christopherson to discuss the idea of a pilot program targeting a specific area of the collection. They agreed to give it a go as an initiative to "think differently about library service." Although not all staff were in agreement and voiced concerns about patrons waiting too long to receive holds, the board of trustees, who never considered fines a money maker to begin with, approved the decision in March 2014.

A stand alone library, Vernon Area Public Library District, began the discussion back in 2006, but they weren't ready to do away with fines quite yet. Then, when Algonquin found success in eliminating fines in 2014, it was time to revisit. "The idea fell in line with achieving one of our strategic goals of improving customer service. We felt that eliminating fines would reduce the number of negative interactions between patrons and staff, remove barriers to service allowing blocked patrons to come back to use the library, and foster goodwill in the community," says Head of Circulation Stephen Territo. As a result, they wrote a new policy and drafted a recommendation to the board, which approved it unanimously.

### **How does a fine-free program actually work?**

The biggest fear preventing more libraries from letting go of fines is that materials won't come back in a timely matter and thus create longer wait periods for items with holds. The libraries who have implemented fine-free programs have proven that these fears are unfounded.

At Algonquin Area Public Library District, in lieu of fines, patrons are simply billed for the replacement cost of the item once the item is two weeks overdue, plus a processing fee and blocked from further checkouts. If and when the items are eventually returned, the bill and processing fees are waived and no fines assessed.

In a similar approach, Vernon Area Public Library District does not assess fines but bills the replacement cost for items that are more than fourteen days overdue. They wanted to make it clear to the public that "no fines" doesn't mean "no responsibility." Like other libraries who have eliminated fines, patrons are unable to check out any more materials until the overdue ones are returned. If a patron owes more than \$25 for an unreturned item, their account goes into collection if unpaid after thirty-five days, ensuring that the library is acting responsibly with taxpayer dollars.

Maintaining borrowing privileges is the reward for returning your materials on time at Elia Area Public Library District, where patrons are blocked from further checkout until late items are returned. However, there is also a fourteen-day grace period before those borrowing privileges are suspended, allowing more flexibility and incentives for returning items. In a press release to the public, the library stressed the several ways borrowers can renew and manage their account, even when the library is closed, to help mitigate an onslaught of overdue materials.

Evidence suggests that this approach might be more, or at least equally, effective as fines. After running a circulation report of long overdue materials shortly after implementation of the fine-free program, Elia discovered that only four patrons out of over six hundred still had items overdue. "I call that a win," maintains Womack.

You may be wondering how this could work at a smaller library. At Chadwick Public Library District in Carroll County, Library Director Jo Nell Castellani developed her own version of going fine-free. Being one of only two employees meant the elimination of fines didn't need a lot of rules and procedures. Castellani demonstrates that service trumps any fiscal gain. For overdue materials, she will send a letter listing the overdue items with the date the books need to be returned in order to not receive fines. If the items are not returned in three weeks, another letter is sent, billing the cost of the item. When the books do come back, Castellani limits checkouts to one item at a time until she gains a sense that the borrower is to be trusted again.

### **Outcomes: the tangible and the priceless**

Libraries that have gone fine free are not ones that rely heavily on fines for revenue and thus, the goodwill engendered has far outweighed any loss of income. In fact, these libraries state that the revenue from fines had been less than one percent of their overall budget, and I suspect that is the same for many libraries.



Although some patrons have had a hard time wrapping their heads around the idea of no fines—they seem to think the concept is just too good to be true!—the response has been overwhelmingly positive. A family with three children that regularly uses Algonquin Area Public Library District was always scrambling to get their DVDs back on time and a late night run to the library was a weekly occurrence. Now, they no longer see the library as a place that induces stress and creates penalties for transgressions, and they immediately sent a thank you to show their gratitude for the change in policy—just one of many positive interactions now that fines are gone for good.

Algonquin was prepared for any negative outcomes, such as an increase in overdues, by budgeting funds to order more materials and insure hold lists did not become too long. While overdues have doubled since going fine free, they have not had to dig into that extra money, holds have not suffered, and there is plenty in the way of a browsing collection to satisfy patrons.

Algonquin's Christopherson reports another example of the goodwill engendered by going fine-free. "A patron came to the desk with a hot book due that day. She had forty pages to go and was hoping to return her copy and get another one, but there were none on the shelf. I told her that with no fines, she could keep it until Monday and return it on her way to work that morning. The smile was priceless."

Vernon Area Public Library District's Territo notes that not only has the elimination of fines been good for patrons, it produced an unexpected boost in staff morale. "Staff like not having to deal with fines," he said. Because management is no longer putting staff in the position of being the bad guy whose role entails collecting money in their transactions with the public, the "interactions with patrons have been less negative."

In an effort to welcome back those who have been uncomfortable to return because of the shame or financial burden of fines, Ela Area sends out postcards to patrons who haven't visited the library in more than eighteen months. They've already seen thirty patrons come back with these postcards, and that is only one way they are communicating the message; they are tapping into every platform at their disposal, such as social media, signage, newspaper releases, and messages to the school to prompt reconsideration of the library as a place to visit.

### **Eliminating fines when you are part of a shared catalog**

A challenge that may prevent libraries from implementing a fine-free program is whether the library belongs to a shared catalog. However, both Algonquin and Ela Area are members of the Cooperative Computer Services (CCS) catalog, and not all libraries who belong to this cooperative offer a fine-free program. A work-around for Algonquin was to make their fine-free policy only available to cardholders in the district. "We wanted to insure that we did not create a situation in which patrons abandoned their home libraries for the fine-free environment," notes Christopherson.

Ela Area's Womack says they have received great support from their surrounding libraries, much more than anticipated. Taking the lead on an initiative like this allows your fellow libraries to see it in action and be better informed to see if this would work for their own communities.

Whether your library is a stand alone or part of a shared ILS, these libraries demonstrate that fine free is possible. As we move further into the digital realm, fines will become less relevant, so now is a good time to close the book, so to speak. Most importantly, eliminating fines will encourage library use, foster a positive relationship between staff and patrons, and reaffirm that the library is not only full of knowledge, wonder, imagination, but also a benevolent and forgiving place.



## On June 1, we go fine free <sup>[1]</sup>

Published May 15, 2017



*Read the revised Borrowing of Library Items policy.*

[2]

Starting June 1, anyone who checks out materials at an Oak Park Public Library location will no longer be charged overdue fines on those materials.

"Every single mom of young children I know is jumping for joy," said Gwen Walski, an Oak Park mother of three. "I love the library, and my whole family gets so much out of it. I really appreciate the library making this decision to end fines. It's such a relief."

Additionally, cardholders will be able to renew eligible items (excluding items with holds, Hot Picks, and Multicultural Collection items) up to five times <sup>[3]</sup>. That means more time to enjoy materials without worrying about overdue fines.

Under the revised Borrowing of Library Items policy <sup>[2]</sup>, items will still have due dates, and cardholders still have motivation to get their items back on time. Anyone with more than three overdue items at a time will have their library card privileges suspended, including checking out more items and placing holds, until the items are returned or paid for.

## Use, access, equity

"The entire point of our library collection is for it to be used," said Experiences and Initiatives Manager Elizabeth Marszalik. "We want our books, movies, and music to circulate. We want people to check items out and enjoy them without stress and fear of fines."

Policies should define how the library wants to interact with the community, said Executive Director David J. Seleb. "And this policy change is focused on access and equity. 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."



As one library assistant put it: "Many people are living from paycheck to paycheck. If they incur a couple of big fines on their cards, or one of their children's cards, it's enough to have them leave the library and stay away."

Eliminating overdue fines is not a new idea, Seleb noted, and Oak Park is not the first library to do so. Other Chicago-area libraries that have already made this kind of change, including [Algonquin Area Public Library](#) [4] and [Addison Public Library](#) [5], have reported that their patrons have been pleased with the change.

And in a [policy statement](#) [6], the American Library Association promotes "the removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges."

## 'Putting books in the hands of readers'

Fines [7] have typically accounted for only about 1 percent of the library's total operating revenue, and they continue to trend down.

"The fact is, we don't need overdue fines to have a healthy, responsible budget," said Deputy Director Jim Madigan. "Oak Park taxpayers will not pay more to the library as a result of this change.

"Bottom line, the use of library materials and services is the point," he added. "We don't want to be in the business of collecting overdue fines. We are in the business of literacy and learning: circulating our materials, putting books in the hands of readers, and welcoming back those who may have been turned away in the past because of overdue fines."



## Removing barriers

At any one time, about half of library users have overdue fines.

Gwen Walski has been among those cardholders. With three girls of different ages, who each want their own books, she said her family often has 30 to 40 books out at any one time. When they've missed due dates, often during a school holiday or childhood illness, those overdue fines add up.

"Why can't they get a book back on time?" Walski imagines people asking. "But if you're not in that world of checking out a million children's books at once, you just don't realize."

Other reasons you might not return materials on time: Your grandson is hiding them in his room. Your wife is in the hospital. You're out of town. Your basement flooded, you broke your ankle, your car's in the shop. You haven't finished [season two of \*Call the Midwife\*](#) [8]. Maybe you just forgot.

Whatever the reason, "We know one thing: overdue fines are a barrier to service," said Experiences and Initiatives Manager Lori Pulliam. "Imposing them is contrary to why we exist and what we do: sharing the information, services, and opportunities that fulfill Oak Park's aspirations."

## 'We're all in this together'

Even without the threat of overdue fines, Walski said her three daughters will continue to learn about responsibly using library materials. "We're learning about sharing," she said. "And that we're all in this together."

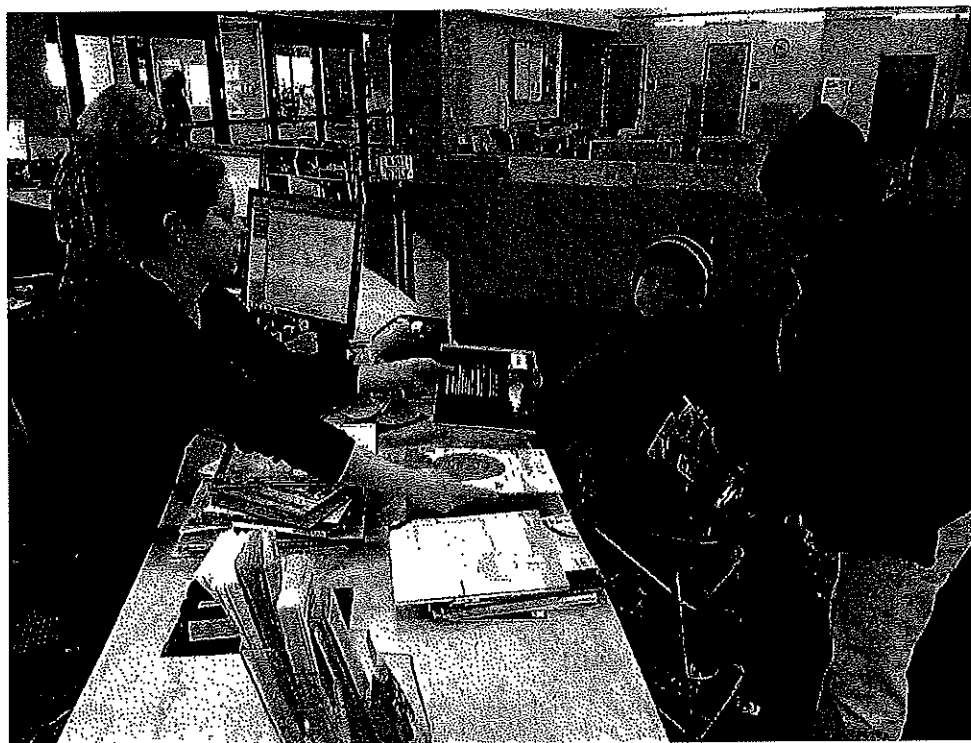
Another mother of three, Megan Galeener, agreed: "We talk a lot about, well, if we keep this book, someone else can't have it. It's someone else's turn."

As for the overdue fines she's incurred, Galeener said, "I can afford it, and I still feel shame. No one should feel shame when they come to the library. No kid should be denied a book."

Source URL: <http://oppl.org/about/library-news/june-1-we-go-fine-free>

News | posted: 12/27/2017 5:30 AM

# Fremont Library officials considering ending late fees



Circulation assistant Christine Cerniglia, left, checks out books for the Sermeno family Tuesday at the Fremont Public Library in Mundelein. Library officials are considering eliminating overdue fines.

*Russell Lissau | Staff Photographer*



**Russell Lissau**

Fremont Public Library (<https://www.fremontlibrary.org/>) officials are considering eliminating fines for overdue books and other materials.

The Mundelein facility would become the fourth suburban library to ditch late fees. The others are the Vernon Area Public Library (<http://www.vapld.info/>) in Lincolnshire, the Ela Area Public Library (<https://www.eapl.org/>) in Lake Zurich and the Algonquin Area Public Library (<https://www.aapl.org/>).

Fremont patrons are charged 10 cents a day for overdue books and most other late items. Daily \$1 fines are assessed for some materials, including new video games, new DVDs and telescopes.

Overdue fines are a timeless library tradition. But these days, dime-a-day fines don't deter customers from keeping items beyond their due dates, Fremont Library Director Scott Davis said.

"The reason we do it just doesn't work," Davis said.

Library patron Julie Port agreed. The threat of fines doesn't stop her from keeping books past their due dates.

"I probably have a \$3 fee on my account (now)," Port, of Mundelein, said during a library visit Tuesday. "I'm not going to rush over here for 10 cents."

Additionally, the fear of fines prevents some people from using the library, Davis said.

"We don't want people to be gun-shy about coming in because the last time they had too many fines," Davis said. "Let's take out all the angst."

Davis began investigating the costs and benefits of eliminating late fees at Fremont after he attended a discussion of the subject at an American Library Association conference this summer.

The amount of revenue fines generate annually at Fremont wasn't immediately available. Typically the sum is 1 percent of a library's operating budget or even less, Davis said.

And collecting fines sometimes actually costs a library money.

When a patron uses a credit card to pay a very small fine, the credit card company's processing fee can exceed the amount of the fine, Davis said.

Davis thinks the goodwill eliminating fines may create among patrons could be worth the lost revenue.

"Think of it like a marketing campaign," he said. "If people come away feeling better about their visit to the library, how much would you pay for that?"

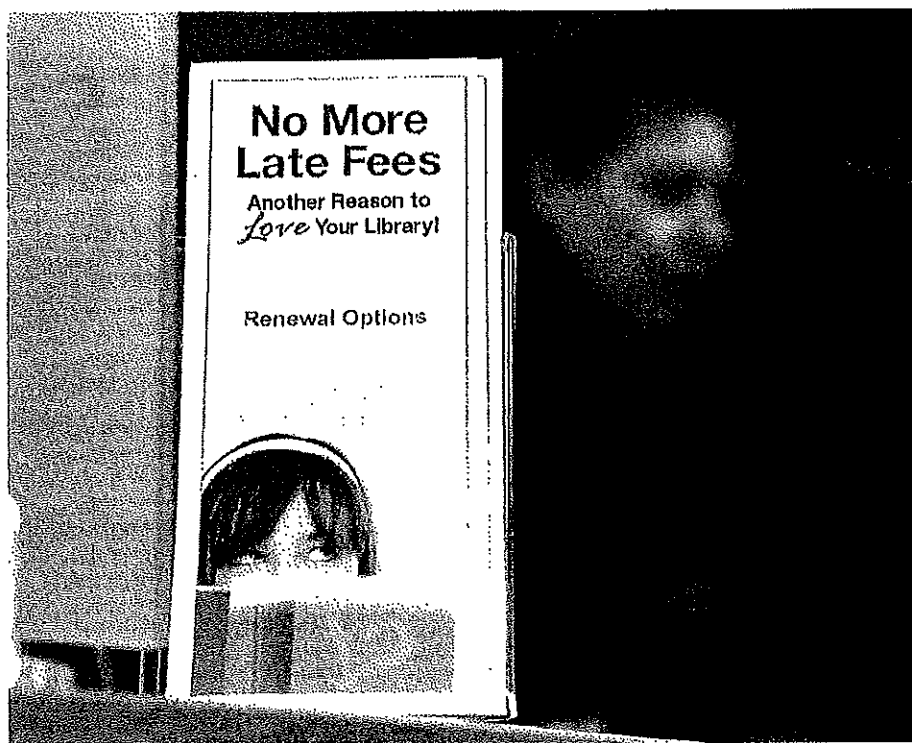
Fremont Public Library board members are receptive to the idea but want some data before making a decision, Davis said. A discussion is expected at the January board meeting.

## **Topics in this Article**

Fremont, Scott Davis, Julie Port, Algonquin area, Ela area, Vernon area, New TV, lake Zurich

Columns | updated: 2/28/2018 5:57 AM

# Are libraries closing the book on late fees?



The Elmhurst Area Public Library District eliminated fines two years ago, which used to generate roughly \$50,000 a year for the Lake Zurich-based library.

*Paul Valade | Staff Photographer*



**Jake Griffin**

Overdue books, DVDs and other items cost Vernon Area Library District patrons about \$50,000 in fines in 2015.

Nowadays, they pay nothing for their tardiness.

The library is one of several in the suburbs to do away with fines on the theory they create ill will and keep people from using the library.

"Nobody likes to shake anybody down for 10 cents. Our patrons didn't like it, and our staff didn't like doing it," said Cindy Fuerst, director of the Lincolnshire-based library.

But those dimes added up.

Across the suburbs, revenue from fines has dropped by almost \$695,138 a year since 2015. That's according to a Daily Herald analysis of audits from 51 suburban library districts and municipal library systems.

In part, that's because half a dozen libraries no longer levy fines, but also because of other changes. Some libraries automatically renew overdue material to keep patrons from accruing daily penalties if there's no one on a waiting list for the item. There's also a rise in use of electronic books and other downloadable material that simply disappears from devices once the borrowing period is over, with no fines.

Five suburban library systems have seen yearly fine collections drop more than \$40,000 each since 2015.

Some libraries have found ways to make up the money, some have cut costs, and a few have actually increased revenue from fines.

The Elmhurst Area Public Library based in Lake Zurich beefed up its passport processing program after it stopped collecting fines. People applying for passports pay a surcharge, which library Director Matt Womack said more than covers the lost late fees.

Other libraries have streamlined operations.

"Once we instituted automatic renewals, that precluded a lot of materials from becoming late," said Batavia Public Library District Director George Scheetz. "For our size library, that was a good chunk of money that we really haven't replaced. We just took the hit."

Late fee revenue in Batavia dropped from \$45,686 in 2015 to \$16,931 in 2017. Still, Batavia's library board wasn't ready to give up on fines altogether, Scheetz said.

"Fines are a reflection of good stewardship of the library's resources," Scheetz said. "If something isn't brought back, or is brought back late, that means the next person that wants it is being denied access to it."

Library officials say the revenue drop doesn't result from declining library usage.

"In fact, statistics show that usage is up," said Diane Foote, executive director of the Illinois Library Association. "Libraries are actually experiencing a modest growth because of programming and other initiatives."

But the movement to end fines is gaining momentum, Foote said.

Along with Elmhurst and Vernon, library districts like Algonquin, Wood Dale, Kaneville and Lakemoor's River East no longer collect fines, according to the districts' financial reports. Most stopped within the past two years.

"Fines were implemented as a way to encourage people to bring materials back to the library and never intended to be a barrier to service, but for some that's what it's become," Womack said. "If they rack up a fine and can't afford to use the library, that doesn't do anybody any good. Plus, a \$10 or \$15 fine pales in comparison to what a family pays in property taxes to access our library."

In lieu of fines, patrons simply aren't allowed to check out any more items until the late ones are returned.

The Fremont Public Library District board in Mundelein recently voted to end fines in April. Addison -- one of the few libraries to see an increase in late fee revenue between 2015 and 2017 -- went "fine free" in late 2016 for district residents only, which will decrease revenues by roughly \$40,000 a year, officials estimated.

"It seemed like a really nice appropriate thing to do for our residents," said Dianne Ludwig, Addison's head of guest services.

"We just shaved a little here and a little there out of other parts of the budget."

Many library administrators said they saw the writing on the wall with the revenue decline and pushed their boards to give up fines to curry goodwill with patrons. Most fines are set at a nickel or dime a day. Sometimes collecting the fines was more expensive than what was being collected, they said.

Though it's collecting about \$50,000 less a year after dropping fines, the Vernon Area Public Library still generates roughly \$21,000 from lost or damaged materials, according to their financial records. Fuerst said the staff time that went into chasing down late fees and processing payments offset the revenue generated by the fines.

Fuerst said after ending fines, the library experienced an uptick in new patrons who were issued library cards. And late materials that previously averaged 19 days overdue come in an average of 11 days late after fines were stopped, Fuerst said.

Ludwig said the same thing happened in Addison.

"It is counterintuitive, right?" she said.

For most libraries, fines make up about 1 percent of the annual revenue. Because libraries are limited in how they generate funds -- mostly through property taxes -- many boards hesitate to give up fines.

"It is important revenue," said Carole Medal, executive director of Elgin's Gail Borden Library District. "We have discussed the idea (of eliminating late fees), but we feel that it is an incentive to return the materials."

Gail Borden, which receives about \$200,000 annually in late fees, is also one of the few districts to see an increase in that revenue from 2015 to 2017. And that's even after the library reduced the fine for late DVDs from 10 cents a day to 5 cents.

## **Got a tip?**

Contact Jake at [jgriffin@dailyherald.com](mailto:jgriffin@dailyherald.com) or (847) 427-4602.

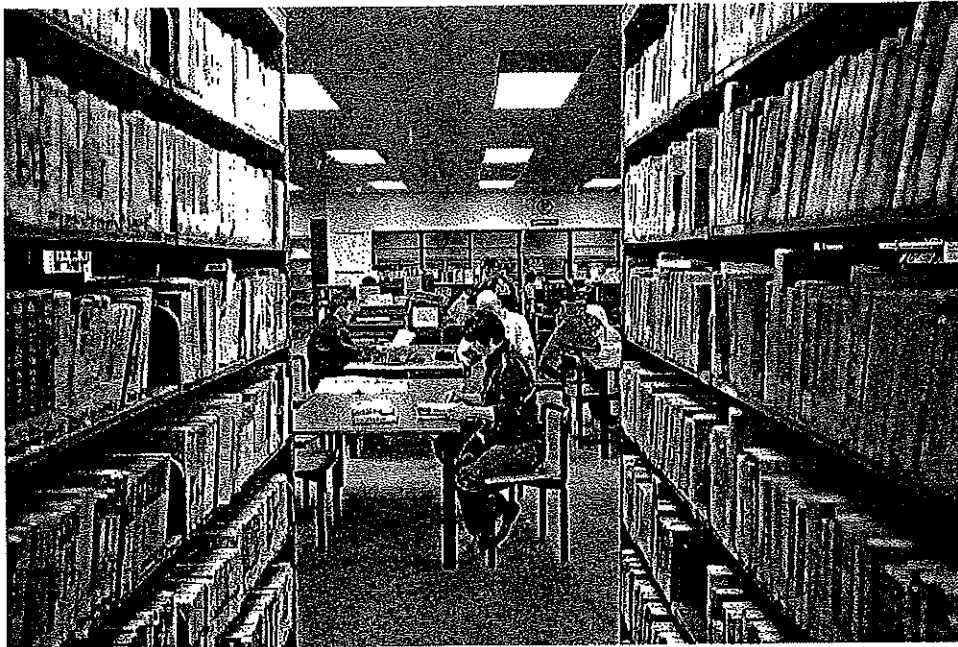


EDITORIALS COMMENTARY

# If Chicago libraries are dropping late fees, show the proof it's best for kids

If the Chicago Public Library is going to eliminate late fees, let's see the evidence in a year or two that doing so has put more books into children's hands.

By CST Editorial Board | Sep 30, 2019, 3:37pm CDT



The Chicago Public Library will eliminate late fees — an idea championed by Mayor Lori Lightfoot. | Rich Hein/Sun-Times file photo

Last spring, the Chicago Sun-Times partnered with the public schools to get at least one book into the hands of at least 2,500 children as they went home for summer vacation.

We were thrilled to be a part of the program, “Chicago Reads.” Nothing ensures success in life more than the ability to read. A child who can read — and who, better yet, loves to read — is halfway home to traveling the world.

## Editorials

It’s with that in mind that we support a new plan by the Chicago Public Library to eliminate late fees starting on Oct. 1. If late fees are keeping kids from checking out books and other materials from the library — and the data suggests they are — then let’s see what happens when late fees are eliminated.

We take this position, though, with reservations. We believe in personal responsibility — that’s the rub — and there’s a good argument that people already can avoid library late fees just by getting books back on time.

If the Chicago Public Library is going to eliminate late fees, we’d like to see hard evidence, a year or two from now, that doing so has resulted in more people, especially children, using the library. We’d also like to see proof that the new policy has not led to even more people failing to return library materials.

Toward that end, the library’s new policy should include a sunset provision. Late fines should kick back in at a date set now if an internal review cannot substantiate the benefits of eliminating the fines.

If more people are checking out materials because there are no late fees, that should be easy to measure. If more people than ever are failing to return materials, that should be easy to measure, too.

If Chicago is going to forfeit \$875,000 a year in library fines — money that goes into the general revenue fund — let's be sure it's worth the cost.

Our general support for the new plan, presented by Mayor Lori Lightfoot, rests on a single unsettling statistic:

One in every three library card holders in the Chicago Public Library's South District — the entire city south of 59th Street — is locked out from borrowing books because they have \$10 or more in late fees. In the library's North District — an area north of North Avenue — only one in six cardholders are locked out.

We can debate until the cows come home why this is. Is it a matter of failed personal responsibility for which we should feel little sympathy? Or is it prohibitively difficult for many low income families to pay a late fee of even \$10?

The answers to those questions matter less to us than the unacceptable result — tens of thousands of Chicago's children can't check a book out of the library.

We are doing our schools no favors.

Librarians generally favor eliminating late fees, viewing them as barriers that discriminate against the poor. A major "policy objective" of the American Library Association is the "removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges." At a meeting in January, the ALA passed a resolution calling library fines "a form of social inequity."

Public library systems in other cities — including Denver, Nashville and Columbus, Ohio — have eliminated late fees and report no negative consequences.

On the contrary, says Sarah Houghton, director of the San Rafael, California, public library, libraries have learned that the best way to get people to return books and other materials is to remind them, not fine them. What motivates people to return things, that is to say, is a desire to be good library citizens, not monetary penalties.

The San Rafael Library does not charge late fines for children's books and materials, but instead sends families an email three days before an item is due and a second email one day after the item was due. If they still have no luck, they send an email three weeks later stating that the patron must return the item or pay for a replacement.

"We have found that people do not keep youth materials out any longer since we've eliminated fines," Houghton said in an interview last year with American Libraries magazine. "This has been shown in library after library as they eliminate some or all overdue fines."

We definitely think best of library patrons who return stuff on time or pay a fee without whining. We're thinking in particular of Emily Canellos-Simms, of downstate Kewanee, who holds the Guinness World Record for paying the highest library book fine, \$345.14.

Canellos-Simms found a copy of book of children's poems, "Days and Deeds", in her mother's home in 2002. It had been overdue from the Kewanee Public Library since April 15, 1955. She returned it.

But a library's primary mission is to get books into people's hands. It is, as Houghton said, to "encourage lifelong learning, exploration and innovation."

If eliminating late fees furthers that mission, we support the move on balance.

And in a year or two, the Chicago Public Library should be able to show the proof.