



Going Fine Free at Ilsley Public Library

January, 2020

A proposal to increase access, eliminate inequitable impact, and improve customer service.

Going fine free is a growing trend in American public libraries. Over the past decade many public libraries have eliminated fines, and have reported increased visits and circulation as a result. Overdue fines can be a financial barrier to access, and they disproportionately impact low income families. Removing them is a way to increase access to library collections and services for those who need them most, and to improve the library's relationship with members of the community.

A central tenet of Ilsley Public Library's mission is that "Ilsley welcomes all" and provides "services for every visitor, regardless of income, race, gender, language, or religion." This report and proposal illustrates how the library's current policy of assessing fines hinders our ability to provide services to everyone regardless of income, and proposes that Ilsley Public Library go fine free in an effort to further our mission and remove barriers to access.

Current Fines and Fees at Ilsley Public Library

Definitions

- Fines: Amount charged per item, per day for materials not returned by the due date.
- Fees: Fees assessed for lost or damaged library materials.
- Blocked Account: A patron account that has accrued \$5.00 or more in fines and fees is blocked from checking out or renewing both physical and digital materials.

Current Library Policy

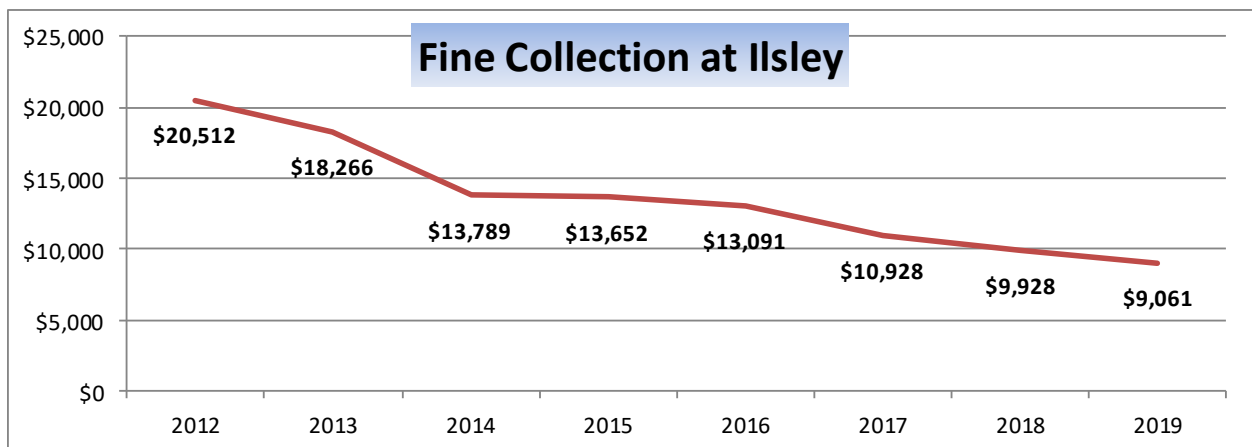
- Fines and fees, if any, are to be determined by the library director subject to the approval of the Board of Trustees. The library director shall establish procedures for the levying and collection of such fines and/or fees due for overdue, damaged or lost materials.
- Patrons are responsible for replacing items that are lost or damaged beyond use.

Patron Category	Fines	Maximum Fee per Item
Adult	\$0.10 / day books, \$1.00 / day videos	\$8.00 / item on books and videos
Juvenile	\$0.05 / day books, \$1.00 / day videos	\$4.00 / item on books, \$8.00 / item on videos

Library Revenue Trends

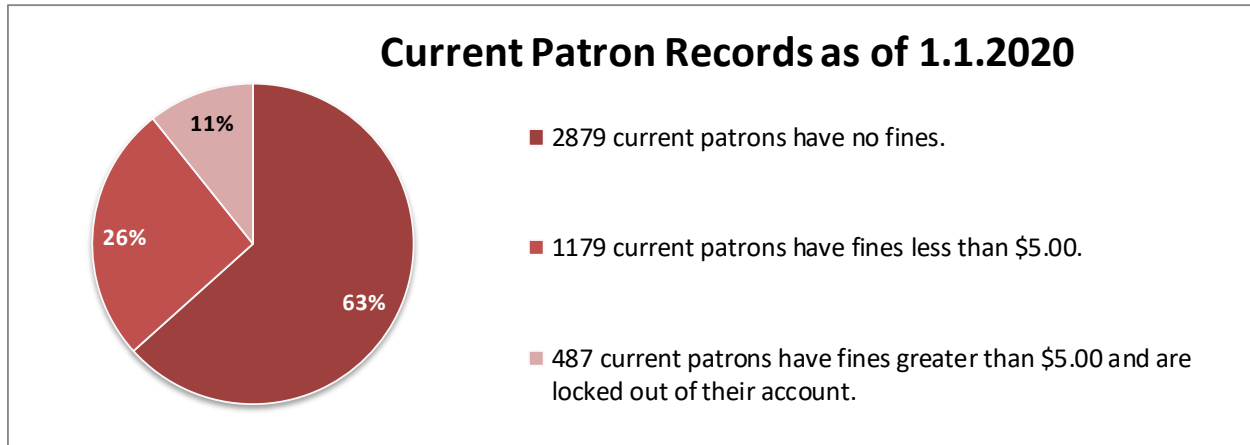
Library revenue is trending downward. This is happening for several reasons:

- There are fewer fines because we are circulating more e-books and audiobooks, which don't incur fines or fees.
- Fines are collected at point of service, and we cannot make people pay fines. Patrons who incur fines may simply choose stop using the library rather than pay their fines.

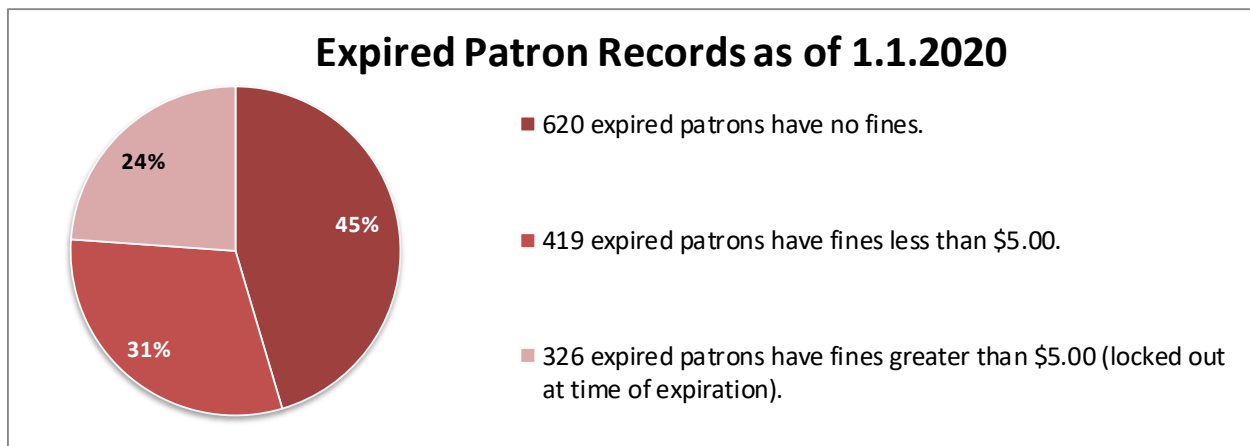


Library Patrons and Fines

Many library patrons incur fines and fees. As of January 1, 2020, 37% of current library patrons had fines or fees on their account. 11% of current library patrons were locked out of their accounts because they owed over \$5.00. That means that one out of every ten library patrons that visit the library isn't able to checkout materials without first paying fines.



Over half of expired patron records¹ have fines or fees on their account, and 24% of those were locked out of their accounts. The higher percentage of locked accounts amongst expired patron records indicates that for many patrons incurring fines over \$5.00 becomes a barrier to use, and rather than pay the fine they stop using the library and allow their account to expire.



¹ Patrons need to renew their library card every year; if a patron does not renew their card, their patron record expires. The data used in the above graph reflects patron records that expired between January 1, 2017 and January 1, 2019.

Benefits of Eliminating Fines

Increasing Patron Access and Library Usage

Many libraries have reported increased access after eliminating fines (for a few case studies, reference the Colorado State Library,² Saint Paul Libraries,³ and Nashville Public Library⁴). When patrons accrue fines over \$5.00 and cannot afford to clear those fines they stop using the library. We want to reverse this trend and get community members back into our library to use materials and enhance their quality of life and education. Even patrons who can afford to pay fines can experience reduced access as a result of fines; if a patron with fines over \$5.00 wants to pay their fine but isn't carrying cash on them, they are unable to checkout materials and leave empty-handed.

Reducing Inequitable Impact of Fines

Too often, fines penalize the people who least can afford them, especially children. Fines disproportionately impact low income families, and IISLEY has received specific feedback from our community's most vulnerable families that the mere possibility of accruing fines has prevented them from getting a library card. As the San Francisco Library noted in their report on going fine free, "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."

Improving Library Relationship with Patrons/Customer Service

Paying fines is often the most negative association patrons have with their library, and collecting fines strains the relationship between library staff and patrons. Patrons are embarrassed when told they cannot checkout materials because their fines exceed \$5.00, often ask library staff to make exceptions for them, or take it personally when an exception is not made. They leave with the feeling that library staff is preventing them from accessing materials. Library staff work incredibly hard to provide good customer service and build positive relationships with community members; collecting fines undermines this effort.

Optimizing Staff Time

In addition to impacting librarians' relationship with their patrons, collecting fines also takes up valuable time. Collecting fines can lead to extended conflicts with patrons that slows down the checkout process, forming a line and making other patrons wait to check out books. If staff deal with fine collecting-transactions for only thirty minutes a day, that is over 150 hours of staff time a year that could be better spent enhancing library services in other ways.

² Johnson Depriest, Meg. Colorado State Library. "Removing Barriers to Access: Eliminating Library Fines and Fees on Children's Materials." 2015. Pp. 18.

<http://spellproject.weebly.com/uploads/1/5/3/3/15331602/spellwhitepaperfinal.pdf>

³ Saint Paul Public Library. "Your Account FAQs." <https://sppl.org/faq/fines-and-fees/>

⁴ Dixon, Jennifer A. Library Journal. "Nashville, Salt Lake City, Columbus Eliminate Fines." 11 July, 2017.

<https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=nashville-salt-lake-city-columbus-eliminate-fines>

Common Questions about Going Fine Free

Is there are no fines, why would anyone return a book on time?

Patrons still have their borrowing privileges suspended for unreturned items, so there is a still incentive to return books on time. Patrons are also still billed for lost materials. By keeping *fees* and removing *fines*, we can keep the incentive to return items while eliminating the punitive measures that discourage use.

Don't overdue fines help teach responsibility?

The library's primary mission is to "bring people and ideas together to foster public dialogue, build community, and enrich lives." Even if teaching responsibility *was* the library's primary goal, fines aren't that effective of a tool to do so. The majority of people want to return their books on time, but life gets in the way; a child misplaces a book, plans change at the last minute, etc. There is no research to demonstrate that fines help teach responsibility.

Will patrons still be charged for lost or damaged items?

Yes, fees will remain in place. Patrons that have fees will have their accounts locked until those fees can be paid.

Even if people have incentive to return books, won't they return them more slowly if we go fine free?

The vast majority of libraries that go fine free have found that overdue fines do not affect how fast people bring books back; return rates are the same before and after.

I heard that going fine free can actually result in *more* materials being returned to the library. Is this possible?

It is possible! Many libraries experience an increase in returned materials after going fine free. This is because some people who can't afford to pay fines on an overdue book will decide to not bother bringing it back. Additionally, some patrons are embarrassed to bring items back late and would rather keep the book than face library staff and pay a fine. Ilsley has had "amnesty days" in the past, where patrons can return overdue books and have their fines waived, and we have found we get lots of materials returned on those days!

Resources

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