



Wednesday, February 28, 2024

Library Board Approves Fine-free Approach to Overdue Materials

The Ericson Public Library Board of Trustees has voted to end fines for library cardholders who have overdue books, videos or other materials, excluding hotspots.

Ericson Library Director Jamie Williams, who discussed the concept with the Trustees twice in the past few years, shared detailed local information as well as information gathered from other libraries during their January meeting. Trustees voted during their regular February meeting last week to make the change.

“What we were bringing in for revenue for fines was less than 0.5% of our budget. We receive more in photocopies income a year than we do for overdue fines,” Williams said. “We also incur expenses to collect those overdue fines – the staff time spent, the postage on the mailed-out notices – and it was a wash. Knowing how much time staff was spending on overdue fines and what it was bringing in was how they came to the decision.”

She continued, “Statistics show us that fines disproportionately affect children, teens and, obviously, low-income families and really create a barrier for them to use the library. The research shows that punishing people with fines doesn't actually help them to return things on time. ... And once somebody has a late fine, they're less likely to visit the library again.”

Williams noted that the most recent experimentation with the fine-free approach began about five years ago, and the policy has proven to be successful across the country. After the Houston, Texas, library system went fine-free last year, users were allowed to return books and other materials without penalties and start with a clean slate. Julie Mintzer, Deputy Assistant Director for the Houston Public Library Systems said 3,098 customers had their overdue fines forgiven and returned 21,245 items – including three books checked out in 1992 – with a total value of \$425,000 between Jan. 18 and Feb. 17, 2023.

Williams noted the library staff does send reminders to patrons of an approaching due date. A simple way to avoid overdue materials is by using the automatic renewal process, which extends checked-out items for two weeks and can be used three times, she added.

“There are still going to be overdue materials; there just aren't going to be fines. And once an item is overdue, an account is blocked so additional items can't be checked out,” she explained. “That means you can't use Adventure Pass or online services, too.”

Williams said a weekly audit of overdue materials typically runs from five to perhaps 20 items. She attributed the miniscule percentage of late items to library patrons' care and responsibility. Even without fines, library users know they won't be able to check out new materials.

“That alone will help them remember to return items,” she added.

Ultimately, Williams believes the new policy will increase interest in everything the library has to offer. “I think more people will be using the library. (The change) shows goodwill. Patrons realize we want them to have access to information and materials,” she said. “We just want those materials back so other people can check them out.”

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