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Nashville, Salt Lake City, Columbus Eliminate Fines

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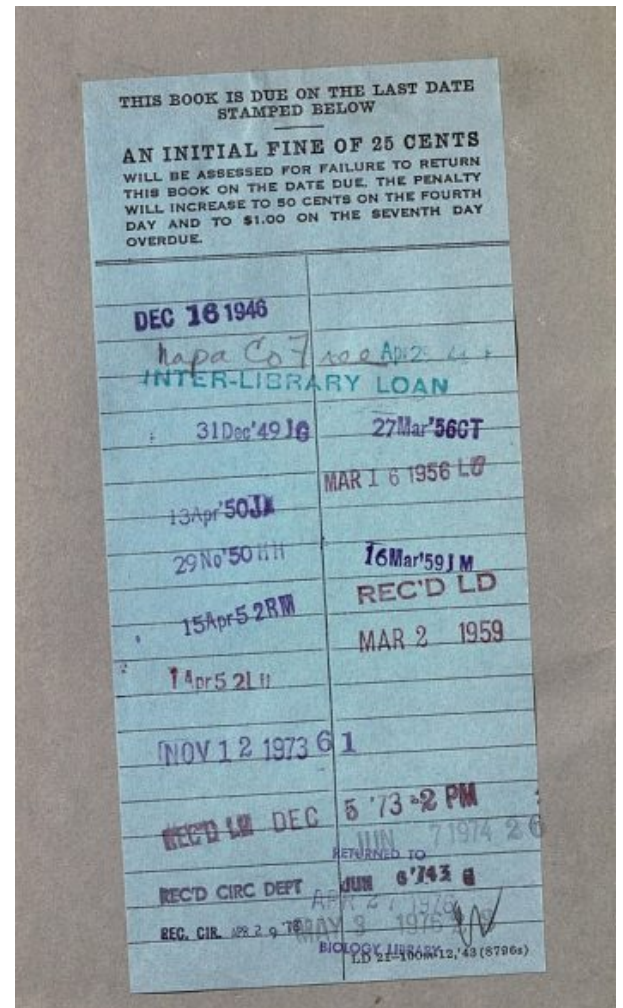
by [Jennifer A. Dixon](#)

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Starting the first week of July 2017, the Nashville Public Library (NPL) and the Salt Lake City Public Library system (SLCPL) have joined the increasing number of public libraries in the United States that no longer collect overdue fines from patrons. These changes will also wipe out fines that users have already accrued. The SLCPL policy took effect July 1, while the Nashville policy started July 5. For both systems, this shift reflects their missions to remove a barrier to library borrowing—blocked card privileges due to fines and to provide equitable access to as many patrons as possible.

TRADING MONEY FOR ACCESS

According to Emily Waltenbaugh, public information officer with NPL, library staff were concerned about the number of accounts that had been blocked because of fines exceeding a \$20 limit. They discovered that as many as 50,000 cards were blocked at any given time, out of a total of 300,000 cardholders. This is a “huge percentage,” she said, and the library was eager to “bring patrons back to the library.” Library books in Nashville will still receive a due date, and librarians do not think that this shift will have a meaningful impact on whether or not patrons return materials on time. Patrons will still receive reminders when a due date approaches and when it has passed. In addition, once 31 days have passed after a due date, the materials will be considered “lost” and patrons will be billed. If patrons have two more “lost” items on their account, their card will be frozen until they pay for or return the materials. In this way, there is “still accountability,” said Waltenbaugh. The move to a fine-free NPL received overwhelming support from local government as well as from the library board, which officially endorsed the eradication of fines in February 2017. The change removes approximately \$159,000 collected in fines each year from the local Nashville general fund; Mayor Megan Barry reflected this reduction in the budget approved in June. This amount works out to .02 percent of Metro Nashville Government’s \$1 billion budget. As Waltenbaugh told *LJ*, “it’s not an insignificant amount of money, but in the scope of the larger [metropolitan Nashville] budget, it’s something that to us is worth losing if it means more access to patrons.” She noted that for



patrons who hit the library's previous \$20 limit, simply knowing that their library card was blocked could make them stay away from the library. The library does not "want any barrier, whether it is financial or psychological," she explained. The amount of fines collected had been declining in recent years because of the increasing popularity of electronic materials, which automatically return on their due date. The library has no plans to make up the reduction, as fines were never meant to be revenue generating, Waltenbaugh said. "We just want the items back, we don't want to profit off patrons." According to NPL Director Kent Oliver, "accessibility for all in our community is a core value for Nashville Public Library; it's at the center of how we view our library. That's why it makes sense to do away with late fines."

FOCUSING ON THE COMMUNITY

SLCPL had similar reasoning to Nashville in cancelling fines, as the library community realized that overdue fines did not noticeably increase item returns, but did have a negative impact on equitable access to the library. The disproportionate impact on lower-income users was stark—according to executive director Peter Bromberg, several branches serving lower-income communities accounted for about 14 percent of materials checked out but 30 percent of blocked cards. Soon after starting as executive director in September 2016, Bromberg introduced the idea of going fine-free to the library board and the local community; board members expressed support and encouraged him to research the idea. The board voted unanimously (with one abstention from a new member) to approve the change. "I'm really proud of the staff here for being really behind it," said Bromberg, and "really proud of the board for saying absolutely, this is part of our mission and part of our values, and we are about equal access and fines are an inequitable barrier." Bromberg also received a positive response from City Council members, who fast-tracked the shift, and connected with local community councils to share the purpose of eliminating fines and how it could help the library serve patrons. Bromberg researched and workshopped extensively, connecting with other library directors who had overseen a change to fine-free libraries and speaking with community groups to see what would work best for SLCPL. This research prepared him for common questions and concerns, in particular worries that doing away with fines would reduce patron accountability for returning materials. The library will continue to hold patrons responsible for lost books, billing their account and blocking their card if they do not return a book after four weeks. When advocating for getting rid of fines, Bromberg recommends that library directors focus on the needs of their local community, gathering opinions and numbers. The statistics on inequality in the library system "really resonated," he said, and helped him make a connection between access to books and the long-term success of children from less privileged backgrounds. SLCPL anticipates a loss of about \$75,000 from fine revenue, in light of the trend toward electronic materials that do not accrue fines. Like Nashville, those voting on the policy change determined that a small decrease in income is worth an increase in meaningful access, and that the library is "not philosophically looking to make money on the backs of a public that has already paid for the library through their

taxes,” said Bromberg. The Salt Lake City council unanimously approved a 23.3 percent budget increase at the same time that the library eliminated fines, so the shift has not led to a decrease in the budget. The library also introduced an autorenewal system on July 1—any item without a hold on it will be automatically renewed three times before it must be returned. Bromberg described the customers and library staff as “giddy” over the change in library fines and the new autorenewal policy. “We want materials in the hands of patrons,” he explained. Books are “better on their bookshelves than on ours—collections are for use. This really supports our core value of having books out in the community.”

COLUMBUS AS ROLE MODEL

Leaders at both the NPL and SLCPL looked to other libraries that have gone fine-free for ideas. Waltenbaugh cited library systems like the Delaware County District Library in Ohio—which has not charged fines since 1986—as well as the Washington, DC; San Francisco; and Pima County, AZ, libraries, which do not charge overdue fees for children’s or teen accounts. Both Waltenbaugh and Bromberg looked to the Columbus Metropolitan Library (CML), OH, which abandoned fines in January 2017, as one inspiration. Like Nashville and Salt Lake City, the staff and board in Columbus abandoned fines because too many of the patrons who need the library most—particularly children and people from neighborhoods with limited resources—had their cards blocked owing to fines. According to CML’s CEO Patrick Losinski, “it just seemed, as we thought deeply about it, that it was unconscionable that we were not providing access to those groups.” Losinski noted that approximately a decade of preliminary efforts preceded the change, all aiming to increase access to library resources. CML implemented “read-off” programs for patrons to read in the library and earn money toward paying off their accounts; it also introduced special fine-free children’s cards and introduced automatic renewals. While patrons are still expected to bring back books and will have their accounts frozen for lost items, the goal is to have the materials returned—not to make money. As Losinski explained it, “in some ways maybe [libraries] thought we could teach responsibility for the last 150 years, and I think that’s a failed experiment.” Overall, Losinski told *LJ*, “libraries should think really deeply about their purpose [and] barriers that are imposed that no longer meet the needs of customers. We can get stuck in our traditions without closely examining them.” For libraries considering making the move to fine-free, he advised, “think about all of the steps involved—but then go for it.”

Columbus Metropolitan Library

fines and fees

Nashville Public Library

Salt Lake City Public Library
