

Berkeley Public Library to end late fees for teen and adult books

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By Frances Dinkelspiel, June 8, 2018, 9:53 a.m.



The Berkeley Public Library said it will do away with overdue fees in a bid to be more egalitarian. Photo: Nancy Rubin

In an effort to make the library more egalitarian, the Berkeley Public Library will stop charging overdue fees for teen and adult books, DVDs, CDs, and magazines on July 1.

The decision to end overdue fees came after the library administration and Board of Library Trustees realized that the 11,000 people blocked from taking out books because of unpaid overdue fees came from Berkeley's lowest-income zip codes — 94702, 94703 and 94710 — according to a press release put out by the library.

While charging late fees had originally been meant to encourage people to return books on time, it ended up acting as a barrier to use for many, particularly those with low incomes, according to Elliot Warren, the acting director of the library.

"Public libraries are the people's university and we need to make sure they are accessible to everyone," said Warren in a statement. "The current practice unintentionally tells some people they are not welcome."

At its Feb. 7 meeting, BOLT voted to affirm a statement on race and equality issued by the Urban Libraries Council that "commits public libraries to the elimination of racial and social equity barriers in library programs, services, policies and practices." At its June 6 meeting, BOLT adopted Warren's proposal to end teen and adult fines.



Elliot Warren, acting director of the Berkeley Public Library. Photo: Frances Dinkelspiel

"People regularly say that they don't check out books because they are afraid of being charged late fees they can't afford," said Warren. "Access to reading for all is vital to a healthy and informed community. Libraries are not a secondary community

service; they are primary. We are prioritizing universal access."

The library has not charged overdue fines for children's material for decades.

Patrons will not be able to get away, however, with taking out books and not ever returning them. The library will charge replacement fees — generally

the retail price of a book — if an item is never returned. Those who have three overdue items won't be allowed to check out any more materials until they return the overdue ones.

"We don't want anyone to feel that they can't afford to use the library," said Jay Dickinson, the library's circulation manager. "Rather than punishing patrons who return books a couple of days late, we are incentivizing returning materials on time. We prefer this positive and welcoming approach."

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— Elliot Warren

The library is crafting a "welcome back" message for the 11,000 people who have not been able to take out library materials because they have not paid off their late fees. It will tell them the fines have been cleared, said Warren. Those who still have books out will have to return them or pay replacement fees before they regain check-out privileges, said Warren.

"Berkeley Public Library has regularly held amnesties to encourage return of materials and we plan to do the same in the future," he said.

The amount of money the library has collected in fines has been steadily decreasing in recent years, said Warren. In addition, it actually costs more to process the overdue fines than the library collects, according to Diane Davenport, the president of BOLT. Most materials (88%) are returned within a week of their due dates anyway, she said.

In fiscal year 2016/2017, the library collected \$172,097 in daily late fees, down from \$252,695 in

2010. This is less than 1% of the library's operating departmental budget. So far this fiscal year (through May), the library has taken \$131,282, so "not receiving this money will have no impact upon service levels," he said.

In addition, it will free up staff time. Each day, one or two librarians spend a large portion of their time collecting late fees, said Warren.

"Money received must be counted, double counted and prepared for deposit," he said. "These are not always straightforward interactions and disputes occur on a regular basis which then often require a supervisor's assistance. We would prefer that our staff be available to help patrons obtain library cards, find materials, get assistance with technology, and learn about library services and programs."

In addition to eliminating the fines, the library has also simplified the fee structure for its Tool Lending Library, according to the press release. In 2018, the library will consider extending the fine-free practice to the tools.

"The amount of time we spend counting and accounting for nickels, dimes, and quarters will be better spent engaging positively with community members and helping them use library resources and facilities," said Dickinson. "And the main incentive to return books on time is so you can check out even more titles!"

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