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Library May Eliminate Overdue Fees to Live up to 'Free and Equal Access'

The Public Library's proposal to eliminate overdue fines isn't because librarians gave up on collecting them. It's about restoring access to low-income San Franciscans.

Ida Mojada (<http://www.sfweekly.com/author/imojedad/>) / Tue Jan 15th, 2019 11:36am / [NEWS \(HTTP://WWW.SFWeekly.COM/NEWS/\)](http://WWW.SFWeekly.COM/NEWS/)

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A man returns his book outside the San Francisco Public Library. (Daniel Kim/Special to S.F. Examiner)

Those few dollars in overdue fees blemishing library accounts of San Franciscans may soon cease to exist, depending on whether a proposal to eliminate overdue fines moves forward this week.

The San Francisco Library Commission will consider recommending changes to library fines at its Thursday meeting (<https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/fines-ordinance011719.pdf>) before the Board of Supervisors would take up a vote. More than 50 jurisdictions have already eliminated similar fines, including Berkeley and San Diego.

Patrons are typically charged 10 cents daily for overdue material — or five cents daily for seniors — up to a maximum of five dollars. The Public Library has not enforced overdue fees for juvenile and teen accounts since 1974, meaning the 34.8 percent of patrons who owe money are all adults.

But the proposal is not merely out of resignation over outstanding debt. A study the Office of the Treasurer released Monday on the fine-free movement, dubbed “Long Overdue (<https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>),” found that such fines disproportionately affect low-income people and have not proven themselves effective in returning borrowed books and other materials.

The nearly 35 percent of patrons in arrears owe an average of \$23.40 in fines and billed-item fees. Five percent of current users have blocked accounts due to unpaid fines and a surprising 88.9 percent of patrons faced blocked accounts at some point, a survey found. One e-library user included in the study said they’ve been unable to check out books for years because they couldn’t afford to pay overdue fines incurred after falling ill.

The Bayview branch illustrates some disparities. Late-return rates are similar across the city, but on average, Bayview patrons owe \$45.63 and 11 percent have blocked accounts.

“As a city, we need to make sure that we are not placing unnecessary burdens on people to access our public resources,” Mayor London Breed said in a statement on Monday. “In this case, the fines and fees are overwhelmingly affecting people in our community from disadvantaged backgrounds, which undermines the goal of the library and reinforces inequality in our city.”

Never-ending borrowing is not expected, since fees for lost or damaged items would continue. According to the study, none of the libraries that eliminated fines have seen increases in late returns, lengthier hold times, or more missing books. It recommends a reduction in the billing deadline from 60 days overdue to 21 days overdue, although that change is not included in the resolution.

SFPL is also unconcerned over lost revenue, as the \$333,000 collected in overdue fines during the last fiscal year is just 0.2 percent of its operating budget. Through four amnesty periods over the past 20 years, the system recovered about 745,000 items and reduced debt by \$400,000. Plus, library staff would have up to 3,464 hours freed up annually to focus on other duties instead of fine collection.

Fine elimination is already part of SFPL’s 2016-2021 Strategic Plan, which includes living up to its mission statement of dedication to “free and equal access.” The system is already preparing to implement auto-renewal for materials without holds to prevent material from being overdue in the first place.

The study also recommends increasing late notice warnings and communicating why fines were eliminated to patrons.

"The Library is here for the people of San Francisco and we want everyone to be able to take advantage of our incredible collections and resources," said Acting City Librarian Michael Lambert. "There has never been a better time for us to eliminate overdue fines and reaffirm that all are welcome at the library."



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