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Are library late fees on the verge of extinction?



Oakland is the latest facility to join the All Is Forgiven movement

By **PATRICK MAY** | pmay@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
PUBLISHED: May 31, 2019 at 2:15 pm | UPDATED: June 3, 2019 at 4:33 pm

Oakland is about to join the global library system's All Is Forgiven movement.

As more and more libraries around the world go fine-free, a recognition that late fees disproportionately affect disadvantaged segments of the community, Oakland says that as of July 1, enough is enough.

"The Oakland Public Library (OPL) will be easier to use and access than ever before after the Oakland City Council approved the Library's request to eliminate overdue fines for library materials during May 21's meeting at City Hall," library administrators said in a statement.

The library says that books, audiobooks, CDs, DVDs and items reserved through LINK+ will no longer incur overdue fines. Patrons still will be billed a replacement fee for items not returned 30 days past the due date, but that fee will be excused when the item is returned in good condition.

"Our library exists because of community support. Our materials are meant to be used, and this is a more effective way of ensuring their availability to everyone," said Jamie Turbak, Oakland's director of library services.

Oakland joins the scores of library systems nationwide, and many more overseas, in "recognizing that overdue fines create unnecessary and inequitable barriers to resources," according to the library system's administrators. "Moreover, overdue fines negatively affect patrons who can least afford the fine and are not an effective incentive to returning library materials."

In the Bay Area, Contra Costa County and San Mateo County libraries have eliminated overdue fines as well, as have a number of other communities. This map shows the Bay Area libraries that have either gone fine-free or are considering it.

Meanwhile, librarians in other communities are addressing the issue of eliminating fines:

San Francisco

Last year, as part of its Financial Justice Project, the City and County of San Francisco's tax collectors worked with the library system to first get back as much of their missing materials and then overhaul the way libraries levy late fines. In a report, city treasurer Jose Cisneros said his office's Bureau of Delinquent Revenue was able to get more than 5,100 long-overdue materials back into circulation.

"The Library then partnered with our Financial Justice Project team to holistically assess and reform the library system's overdue fines," he wrote. "Libraries across the country have begun the process of going fine-free, recognizing that overdue fines create barriers to access for the very populations the library works to serve, low-income residents, and are not an effective tool to encourage on-time return rates.

"Research conducted over the last year indicates these trends are true in San Francisco as well," Cisneros said. "While library patrons across the city accrue overdue fines at equal rates, low-income communities, African American communities, and communities without advanced degrees are most frequently blocked from accessing the library due to overdue fines. The SFPL has a long history of advancing reforms that benefit the city and the community. We are grateful for the partnership, the thoughtful research, and the leadership of the San Francisco Public Library in recommending the Library eliminate overdue fines to ensure equal access to San Francisco's Public Libraries for all its residents, regardless of income."

In March, the San Francisco Public Library Commission voted to approve a resolution urging the Board of Supervisors to pass an ordinance to forgive all outstanding overdue fines owed to the library and authorizing the San Francisco Public Library to write-off all overdue fines from patron accounts. While that matter is pending, the library said that as of April 22 patrons should “not be blocked from borrowing physical materials from the Library because they have accrued fines associated with overdue items. Patrons will be unable to check out additional physical materials only if they have billed items on their Library record.

“While we await a decision from the Board of Supervisors and the Mayor, fines accrued by patrons — even in excess of \$10 — will not restrict a patron from borrowing items from the Library,” library officials said in a memo.

Montclair, New Jersey

The city this month became what is thought to be the first in New Jersey to stop fining patrons for late books and other materials, including movies, audiotapes and periodicals. Even better, any prior charges for late or lost items will be forgiven as well.

Library Director Peter Coyl told NorthJersey.com that the motivation behind this policy change is rooted in a growing recognition that library fines “adversely affect populations that have the most need for our services.”

What’s more, according to the report, “there’s no evidence that late fines make customers more likely to return items on time or even return them at all. In fact, Coyl said, the opposite often happens, especially among people who don’t have a lot of money.” Coyl added that “people with fines are less likely to come back to the library. It is not something you are going to pay if you have a lot of bills, so you’ll stop coming to the library.”

Chicago area

Four years ago, according to a report in Public Libraries magazine, the Vernon Area Public Library system northwest of Chicago eliminated overdue fines while other libraries followed suit.

“They are modeling their policy on Algonquin (IL) Public Library (another neighbor) and their decision to remove overdue fines,” the report said.

VAPL noted “that Algonquin, nearing its one-year anniversary of installing the policy, has had no adverse effects. In fact, it’s only increased the goodwill of patrons towards the public library. Since introducing the no overdue fines policy, VAPL has also received only positive responses from their patrons and the community at large.”

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Patrick May Patrick May is an award-winning writer for the Bay Area News Group working with the business desk as a general assignment reporter. Over his 34 years in daily newspapers, he has traveled overseas and around the nation, covering wars and natural disasters, writing both breaking news stories and human-interest features. He has won numerous national and regional writing awards during his years as a reporter, 17 of them spent at the Miami Herald.

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