

## Sonoma County Library goes 'fine free' to increase accessibility

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The **Sonoma County Library** will no longer penalize people who forget to return their books on time, a change the countywide system will roll out next week when it wipes away roughly \$880,000 in overdue fines.

Beginning July 1, late fines will no longer be charged. Each **library** also will waive lost fees for anyone who returns a book that's still in good condition, regardless of when it was checked out, **Sonoma County Library** spokesman Ray Holley said.

The changes are intended to encourage former patrons to return to the **library** system's 15 locations without fear of facing hefty fines. Currently, 80,800 people owe the **library** money for overdue materials, Holley said. About 42,000 people have accrued debt of \$10 or more because of a combination of late fines and lost fees, he added.

"One of the primary reason that we are doing this is it will help people who are not financially well-off," Holley said. "We don't want a small financial issue to become the reason why they can't use the **library**."

The change follows a growing "**fine free**" trend nationwide, in which more public libraries are eliminating overdue charges in recognition that they can pose barriers to accessing reading materials, especially for low-income families.

Little evidence exists to show that charging fines encourages more people to return checked-out books and other materials on time, according to a 2016 report published by the Colorado State **Library**.

The **Sonoma State University library** did away with its overdue fines four years ago to encourage more students to use its materials. Two years later, all California State University libraries had adopted the **fine-free** policy.

The San Rafael Public **Library** and the Berkeley Public **Library** no longer have late fines, according to the Urban Libraries Council. Starting July 1, the Oakland Public **Library** and Marin **County Free Library** also will stop charging overdue fines.

Under the current system at the **Sonoma County Library**, a book is considered late three weeks after the initial check-out date, Holley said. Users are charged a late **fine** of 25 cents a day. When the total debt reaches \$10, they are blocked from borrowing materials from the **library**.

Doing away with those late fines will help families like Magda Aguilar and her 8-year-old daughter, who checked out a book about a baby polar bear about two months ago. The pair thought they lost the book somewhere in their home, but found it recently.

"Now we're going to bring it back," Aguilar said.

Patrons still will need to pay for lost or damaged books under the new policy. However, the **library** system will now block people from borrowing once they've reached \$100 in fees for lost books and materials, which is expected to reduce the number of people who currently can't check out items from nearly 42,000 to about 5,000, Holley said. Fees can be waived if there's a mitigating circumstance or if a book is lost by a minor.

The financial impact to the **Sonoma County Library** system for removing the late fines is expected to be relatively small, Holley said.

Late and lost books account for roughly \$250,000 annually, less than 1% of the total revenue each year.

Meanwhile, collecting and processing late fines is time consuming and takes up resources, Holley said. It cost more to collect the fines than the money the **library** makes from them, he said.

"We think this is going to **free** up to 20 hours a month in our accounting department," Holley said. "The revenue is not a big deal for us."

Ajay Bass, 24, supports the move, saying people forget to return books on time for several reasons. He said his grandmother, for example, has health issues that make it difficult for her to remember to return books on time. She also faces several more pressing bills than the late fines she's collected from the **library** over the years.

"I think it should be told to more people," he said of the change. "I think it's a great idea."

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