

Off The Shelf Getting a Fresh Start

Earlier this week, I paid my fine for a DVD that I didn't get back on time and a book that I forgot to renew until it was already overdue. We all have lots of things on our plate and maybe the library book by your bedside or DVD in your player slips your mind as you balance all of your priorities. As someone who comes to the library nearly every day and still sometimes forgets to bring things back or to jump on my computer to renew an item, I get it.

As some people say as they pay their fees at the service desk, the money goes to a good cause. Those fees are all counted as income in the library's budget and that income helps offset the library's impact on the city's general fund.

In other cases, people will say that a few dollars now and then in late fees are worth it for all of the value that they get from being able to borrow materials from the library. When a family checks out 10 picture books, they are taking home up to \$200 worth of materials to use for three weeks. Families with multiple kids and both parents taking out items can carry home a lot of value. An adult who checks out a few art books and a documentary is easily borrowing over \$100 in library materials.

All of that is true, and it is equally true that for many people in our community a few dollars in fees has a bigger relative cost than it does for others. While many of our users don't have to hesitate to pay a \$4 fine, I never want us to lose sight of the fact that, for many other families, they need those dollars to pay for a child's lunch or keep up with heating bills. Not being able to pay that fee could leave them choosing to stop using the library. That is such a loss. We never want someone to lose the value and opportunities that the library can offer.

I also know that coming to the library every day is easy for me because I own a car and have money to pay for gas. Transportation is not so easy for someone who relies on the bus or has to save up to fill the tank. There are a lot of reasons that cause items to be returned late. Work schedules, health issues, and transportation can all get in the way and be a barrier to using the library or cause someone to end up with fees.

In some cases, people lose an item and end up with the replacement cost charged to their account. That too may keep someone from using the library. Even if they find the item, they may fear that the fee will be so large that they end up not coming back to the library and don't get the item returned. Returning the item would reduce the fee to the maximum fee of \$10, which, while less than replacement cost, can still be a daunting fee for people.

Other libraries in our area and across the country are trying to do something about reducing these barriers to access and welcoming back users. We have been studying the various ways that libraries have tried to achieve these goals and putting some into practice.

Last year we started a read off your fees program for anyone under 18. On Monday, January 21, when Burlington School District kids are off from school, we will be having another time where kids can come and read. For every half hour that they sit and read, they are able to have their

overdue fees reduced. North Liberty Public Library has offered a similar path to removing fees from youth accounts.

For the month of January, we are holding a Fresh Start Campaign. Just for this month, anyone can bring back overdue materials to the customer service desk and library staff members will remove eligible fees. This is a special, one-time event and there are some limitations. Feel free to call the library or stop in to learn more.

Our goals are to regain customers and regain collection materials while removing obstacles for individuals pursuing connection and learning at the library. Additionally, this campaign has the added benefit of providing access to the entire community to items that may not have otherwise been returned.

This special campaign is similar to ones done in libraries big and small throughout the country. We used those examples to design our own event. In some large library systems, they have gotten thousands of lost items returned by offering to remove the fees as part of a limited time event like this one.

We have already has several success stories come out of this campaign. A mother was able to get her account reactivated and be able to sign responsibility for her children to get library cards. Another person who hadn't been able to borrow on their account for years got the fees reduced enough that they were able to pay off the rest and start using the library again. We love welcoming back users and opening up all the opportunities of the library to them again.

Anyone with fees over \$5 is also encouraged to talk to staff members about our relatively new payment plan option. While accounts with fees over \$5 are automatically set to not be able to borrow, the payment plan gives us an option to override that if a person pays a small portion of their fee each time they check out. It allows check out of two items at a time, rather than keeping someone from checking out altogether.

We are also offering free replacement cards throughout January. If having lost your card is keeping you from the library, stop in and we will get you going again in no time.

Other libraries have put in place options like Food for Fines. In West Point, the public library does a campaign in November that takes \$1 in fees off of a person's account for every nonperishable food item that they donate. The food is then brought to the Fort Madison food pantry.

Keokuk Public Library has also done food programs. They even had a program where part of your fees were waived if you gave blood during a certain time period.

Burlington Public Library is committed to reducing barriers to access in order to better serve all members of our community. We look forward to announcing other initiatives in the months to come to make using the library easier.

See you at the library!