



Vancouver Public Library

MANAGEMENT REPORT

Date: November 21, 2019
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TO: Library Board
FROM: Rhonda Sherwood, Chair, SFHR Committee
SUBJECT: Study of Expanded Fine-Free Service Model

SUMMARY

This report briefly describes some of the equity issues of fines-based systems in libraries, identifies options for removing barriers to borrowing library materials, and recommends that the Board direct staff to study the implications of expanding the VPL's fine-free services.

PURPOSE

This report is for decision.

RECOMMENDATIONS

THAT the Board direct staff to develop a proposal with budget implications for expanding fine-free services and present the report to the Board in 2020, in advance of the 2021 budget planning process.

COMMITTEE DISCUSSION

The Committee expressed support for reducing barriers to library use, including considering the potential of expanding fine-free access beyond children. They acknowledged that VPL holds a leadership position in this area, and suggested consideration of other ways to reduce barriers, including seeking examples from leading libraries internationally.

CHIEF LIBRARIAN'S COMMENTS

VPL has long recognized the barriers that library fines cause for accessing services, particularly for those who struggle with affordability and need libraries the most. This study will explore opportunities for VPL to continue to move forward in reducing barriers caused by fines and fees.

POLICY

VPL's *Diversity and Inclusion Statement* directs staff to work to create services that diverse communities, including those experiencing barriers due to socio-economic status, identify as respectful, inclusive, and accessible. It states that staff will strive to deliver service that affirms the dignity of our patrons.

Fines, fees and charges related to library cards and lending services are outlined in the *Limits, Holds and Charges schedule*.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

The recommendation in this report supports the 2017-2019 strategic priority: Access and Equity – reduce access barriers.

BACKGROUND

Public libraries, including VPL, have a history of charging overdue fines as an incentive to return materials on time. The VPL Board and staff have long recognized the barrier to library use that is present when patrons are conscious that they cannot afford to pay overdue fines. As a result, VPL has granted exemptions to overdue fines for certain user groups over the years. Currently children, patrons of the Carnegie Branch, and patrons of Accessible Services are granted fine-free status, and these policies have been in place for more than twenty years. Charges for lost materials and non-pick up of holds still apply to these groups.

In 1999, VPL introduced a *Values Based Circulation Service* approach where service delivery considered shared organizational values rather than focusing on rules and regulations. This approach empowered staff to make local decisions on waiving fines and fees based on individual circumstances of a patron. Values-based service considered the patron and their needs, applying values of fairness, respect and quality; whether VPL's policies seemed sensible to our patrons; and provided guidance to staff on removing barriers to successful library use.

From 2004-2008, VPL led the *National Working Together Project*, gaining greater understanding of the full extent to which fines and fees, and the perception of the library as a punitive organization, has impacted library use. This was found to be particularly a barrier for patrons enduring financial hardship, who often will not borrow material because they cannot afford

overdue fines. Through the Working Together Project, VPL created the community librarian roles that continue to be a core part of our service delivery model. Community librarians discuss the needs of individual patrons and waive fines and fees as needed in order to welcome patrons back to the library.

To address inequities, staff have continued to implement new procedures and patron centred approaches to provide the fullest level of access to our collections while limiting the financial risk to the individual.

In 2006, VPL introduced a youth library card, for patrons 14 to 18 years old, with a reduced overdue fines schedule to allow for a better transition from a fine-free card children's card to an adult card. VPL charges youth overdue fines at a rate of 50% of the adult card charges. .

In September 2012, the Board approved a new library card, the Access VPL Card, to allow more people greater access to the collection without the difficulties of providing suitable identification and to reduce the financial risk of fines and select fees. The Access VPL Card has a borrowing limit of two items and exempts patrons from overdue fines, processing fees for lost or damaged items, and lost card fees.

In 2009, VPL created the Internet Access card, which allows people to use the library's computers and WiFi, and does not include borrowing physical material.

DISCUSSION

An increasing number of libraries across North America are recognizing that fines act as a barrier to access, with the most significant impact on low income and vulnerable users who are the very people who need libraries the most. Eliminating overdue fines altogether supports the values of access to information, education, and equity over revenue generation. In the recent years, a number of public libraries have eliminated overdue fines. In British Columbia, this includes Whistler, Powell River, Sechelt, Pemberton, Grand Forks and Smithers. In the United States, it includes Baltimore, Chicago, Saint Paul, San Diego, and Salt Lake City. These public libraries have reported significant increases in library use. For example, nine months after introducing fine free service at the Saint Paul Public Library in Minnesota, the library reported that new library card registration increased 8.2 percent, more than 65,000 items were checked out by people with cards that were previously blocked due to overdue fines, and circulation in the second quarter of 2019 had increased across the board compared to the same time period a year ago, particularly in branches that serve lower-income areas, where it increased 18-19 percent.

These libraries have recognized that a fixed-rate fine policy is inherently inequitable because it does not take into account the financial circumstances of the individual user. Additionally, the experience of accruing and then paying fines is often one of the most negative interactions a user has with the library.

At VPL, public service staff frequently come into contact with patrons who have a high interest in using the library but are either fearful of accruing fines, or have known charges that they are unable to pay. Staff have the authority to waive fines and fees with consideration of patron circumstances and equity issues. As noted above, VPL offers the Access VPL card for individuals who face barriers, such as the inability to pay fines or meet identification requirements, however, patrons who are unaware of the card or too embarrassed to ask for it are not able to take advantage of the service. Below are two stories that illustrate the impact that fines and fees have on some patrons.

- 1) Patron whose lost book fees from 1994 impacted her use of the library until she emailed staff in September 2019

"I have a long outstanding fine with the VPL. It is actually a charge for a book that was stolen from an office I was working in and it dates back to the late 90's. I am a writer/editor, but had taken a temporary job running an office. We were cautioned to always lock up our purses and valuables. It never occurred to me that someone would steal a book. But that's what happened. The book, valued at around \$40.00, vanished from the office. I could not afford to repay the Library and was too embarrassed to ask for a payment plan or some other solution. I greatly miss being able to take books out of a library. I think it's time to deal with this and I'm asking if this fine for the stolen book could be forgiven."

Staff waived the charge and in the email exchange, the patron shared that she couldn't wait to return to her local branch.

- 2) Patron whose overdue fines impacted her willingness to use the library while completing her B.C Adult Graduation Diploma

After a community visit, a staff member arranged to waive some fines for a woman and to get her a new library card. She had been avoiding the library for years because of the fines, but when she got her new card she started coming back to the Central Library regularly. She was working on completing her high school equivalency and would often ask for me so that I could help her find resources for the papers she was writing. The last time I talked to her she had started some college courses and continues to use VPL to support her studies.

Options for Removing Barriers to Library Use

VPL has long demonstrated our commitment to working in a socially inclusive way to ensure that all Vancouverites have access to our collections and services, and that barriers are reduced or removed where feasible. Staff understand the impact that overdue fines have on use of the library by those who struggle with affordability, and strongly support the expansion of fine free

service to all library cardholders so that VPL can build on its history as an inclusive, patron centred system, and fully address the equity issues of a fines system.

This would likely include an auto-renewal program for physical items, and adjustments of other fees where feasible.

VPL relies on revenue from fines as part of our operating budget, currently representing \$700,000 annually (see Financial Implications for further details). Imposing fines also results in costs to the system, both in the payment infrastructure and in staff time. As a result, further study is required to understand the potential cost savings that would offset the losses in revenue if VPL were to move to a fine-free model for service, and to fully explore the benefits and risks.

Staff are recommending a study that will consider the following areas:

- Distribution of suspended cards across neighbourhoods, and relationship to neighbourhood median household incomes.
- Opportunities for cost-savings by reducing the need for payment systems, including potential for cost savings in PCI (credit card handling) compliance program, and for staff savings that can be dedicated to patron service.
- Experience of other public libraries that have gone fine free.
- Consideration of related borrowing procedures that could be implemented concurrently, such as auto-renewal of physical materials that do not have patrons on the hold list, and other fees or practices that may act as barriers.

Option Not Recommended

Staff have also considered reducing fines and fees to lessen the financial impact of borrowing. This approach is not recommended, as it does not encourage individuals who perceive fines as a barrier to engage with the library, and would continue to require that patrons identify themselves as unable to pay in order to have charges waived and continue using the library. While reducing charges gives the library the most control over lost revenue, it does not address the equity issues that fines create.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Costs for funding staff time on research to produce a report studying the impacts of a move to a fine-free model for service would be incorporated in the annual Operating Budget.

Given the total budgeted revenue from fines is approximately \$700,000 per year, VPL staff will need to work with the City of Vancouver's finance team, through the annual operating budget process, to address the shortfall that would result before we can expand fine free services.

Expanding fine-free services to all patrons would need to be an investment request brought forward as part of the 2021 Operating Budget process.

FINAL REMARKS

The VPL Board and staff have a long history of understanding that overdue fines create a barrier to library use for people who struggle with affordability, and have implemented a range of policies, procedures and approaches over the years to address this inequity. Increasing fine-free status from children, Carnegie Branch patrons and Accessible Services patrons to all patrons would ensure everyone feels welcome and able to use library materials for learning and entertainment, especially those who need access to the library's resources the most.