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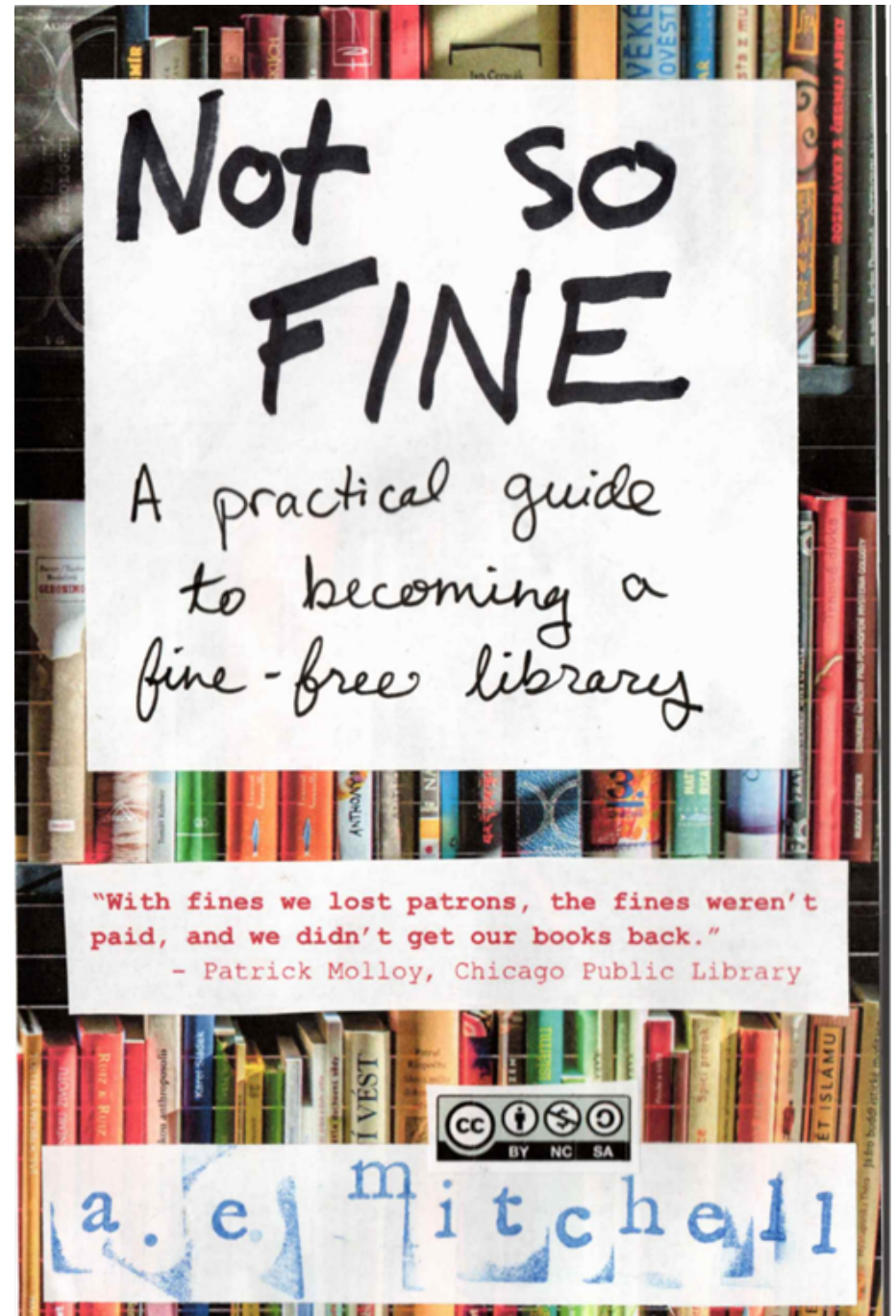
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* Starred resources are recommended for your deeper learning

This zine owes deep gratitude to the fine-free abolitionists that have been doing this work for many years. In particular, it pulls from the tools and research created by Meg J. DePriest. Thank you for your excellent and thoughtful work.





This zine is a guide for fine abolition advocates.

There is NO research that supports charging patrons for late items. Late fees are a holdover from outdated service models built on excluding patrons based on race, class, and creed.

Modern librarians know better: we serve all members of our communities and strive to make that service great. We love our patrons and want to do right by them.

This guide was mindfully created in the midst of the Coronavirus global pandemic, an especially vulnerable time for both library funding and user finances. These are not flippant or overly-optimistic recommendations. These are factual, practical solutions for librarians exploring what going fine-free could mean in their community.

Now, more than ever, is the time to go fine-free.



This zine was created by Anna Elizabeth Mitchell as an assignment for Social Justice for Information Professionals, taught by Kathryn LaBarre and DeAnza Williams at the School of Information Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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Many governing boards prefer to roll out small steps before embracing total fine abolition. Practical first steps may include:

- ☐ adding a grace period before assessing late fees on items
- ☐ automatic item renewals
- ☐ eliminating fees on only some item types (like picture books), or for some groups of card holder (i.e. minors)
- ☐ encouraging staff to work with patrons and waive their fines at the desk. Treat this as an opportunity to build community advocates and altruism: when waiving fees at the desk, ask patrons if they would like to make a donation instead.
- ☐ amnesty periods
[SFPL hosted a 6 week amnesty period in 2017. They recovered ~700,000 overdue items (including a book 100 years past due!) and 5,000 users had their cards unblocked]

Not all solutions are created equal:

Remember any step that is not total fine abolition still has limitations! For instance, amnesty periods only help patrons that can make it to the library within that time frame.

Do not substitute \$\$\$ fees with other forms of "payment." Food-for-fines programs hurt our patrons managing food scarcity. Read-away-fines programs exclude patrons with low literacy skills. Money is not the only valuable resource.



What's the big deal? It's only pocket change!



"Pocket change" is relative

Library fees multiply very quickly! If a patron has ten items that are overdue at a library that charges 50 cents/day in late fees:

$$\begin{aligned} 10 \text{ items} \times \$0.50 \times 1 \text{ day} &= \$5 \\ &\times 14 \text{ days} = \$70 \end{aligned}$$

If a family of four has ten late items each, 2 weeks late:

$$\$70 \times 4 \text{ family members} = \$280$$

Even at just 5 cents a day, a fee that is easy for one patron to pay is devastating to those without discretionary income.

Many libraries work with debt collection agencies for fees that are unpaid. As a result, there are instances of patrons facing lawsuits, jail time, prison sentences, and being denied mortgages due to impacted credit scores. These are cruel and unusual punishments for returning library items late.



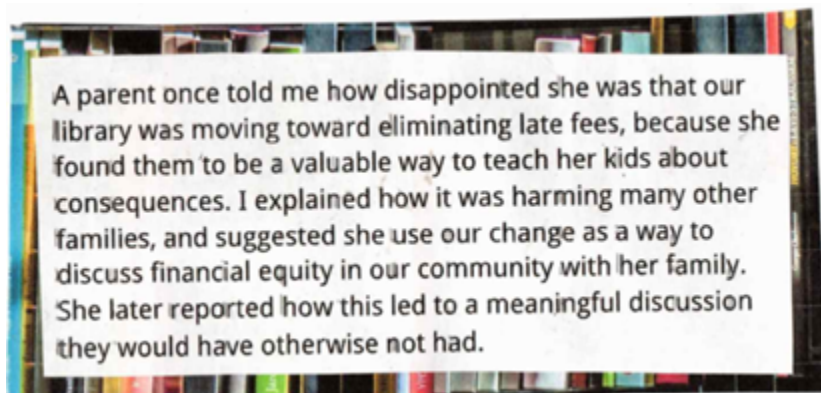
Fines teach kids how to be responsible



"That's never been the mission of any library I know. Our mission is to provide equitable access to information."

- Andy Woodworth, librarian
(endlibraryfines.info)

Minors have minimal power over returning their items. Late fees punish children for situations outside of their control, such as when their caregiver is available to take them to the library.



How to become a



1. Identify other champions of the cause. Look to your library staff, Friends of the Library, early literacy groups, state library association, and community social justice organizations.
2. Gather key statistics from your library:
 - ☐ number of patrons blocked due to fines. Are there discrepancies by neighborhood?
 - ☐ money brought in by late fines vs. costs of collecting fines (staff time, processing and technology fees, cost of sending notifications, collection agency fees, etc.)
3. Gather local stories. Ask your staff, patrons, and non-patrons:
 - ☐ how are they impacted by this issue?
 - ☐ how would their borrowing habits change if your library no longer charged fines?
4. Compile this information into a visual format. Infographic templates can be found through the Colorado Virtual Library
5. Present the pitch to your library's governing body. Keep your message positive, compelling, and convincing. Use both story and statistics to make your case.
6. Be ready to clearly address concerns from local news sources and patrons. Emphasize that fines don't work, they cost money to collect, and harm those that need the library most.



This undue hardship disproportionately impacts low-income communities and non-white communities.

Studies consistently find that neighborhoods with the most patrons blocked from using the library due to unpaid fines, are also neighborhoods with the highest poverty rates.

Before going fine-free, ~30% of people living on the South Side of Chicago couldn't check out items because they had reached the \$10 fine limit for overdue materials. Only 15% of more affluent North Side cardholders had the same problem.

San Diego found nearly half of their patrons with blocked accounts resulting from late fees lived in just two of the city's poorest neighborhoods.

Salt Lake City Public Library learned branches serving lower-income communities accounted for only 14% of materials checked out, but 30% of blocked cards.

When libraries collect fines, we lose our users that need our services the most.

Fine abolition work must be embraced alongside our other trauma-informed, equity work in the library.



Only large, urban public libraries can afford to go eliminate fines



Going fine-free can work for many types of libraries and communities



A 2016 survey found that in many academic libraries, the cost of collecting overdue fees equaled the income generated by them, resulting in no net revenue.



Libraries depend on money from late fees



Late fees are a small portion of library budgets, and are costly to pursue

Nationally on average, late fees are only about 1-1.5% of library revenue streams.

Collecting and processing fines is expensive! There are enormous costs in staff time,* processing fees, letter/email/phone call generation, and expenses involved with money management, banking, and accounting.

Fine-free libraries report that the decision has either been cost-neutralized (where the fine revenue lost is offset from the expense of fine-collecting), or cost-gain. No libraries have reported losing money in the process.

Before going fine-free, San Diego P.L. was spending almost \$1,000,000 to collect only \$650,000 worth of fees each year.

Good library stewardship means we must work toward finding stable and predictable sources of library revenue.

* Formulas for estimating staff time costs:

1 min of staff wage x number of fees processed

OR time spent balancing a daily till (~30 mins) x days open



Patrons won't return their library books without fines



Fines do not increase how many items are returned to the library

Data shows no difference in return rates between libraries that charge fines and those that don't.

Libraries have other, more effective tools to ensure items are returned such as improving communication alerting patrons to the status of their unreturned items.



supports fine abolition work!

In the ALA Policy Statement: Library Services to the Poor, the ALA is tasked with "Promoting the removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges."

The Midwinter 2019 Resolution on Monetary Library Fines as a Form of Social Inequity states: "All library policies and procedures, particularly those involving fines, fees, or other user charges, should be scrutinized for potential barriers to access" and urges libraries to "scrutinize their practices of imposing fines on library patrons and actively move towards eliminating them"