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Kaukauna Public Library first in Fox Cities to adopt fine free policy

The City of Kaukauna and the Kaukauna Public Library are proud to announce that the Library Board has adopted a fine free policy, making them the first public library in the Fox Cities to go fine free. As of January 1st, 2020, the library will no longer have a ten cent per day late fee.

The public library fine free movement has been sweeping the nation, gaining a lot of momentum after Wisconsin librarian, Dawn Wancek, presented a [TED Talk](#) advocating for equitable library service for all in 2018. Library Director Ashley Thiem-Menning brought the topic up in early 2019 for Library Board consideration.

Kaukauna Public Library currently has 13,775 card holders, 17.1% of whom are blocked from accessing their accounts because their balance is over five dollars. Kaukauna Public Library is part of the Outagamie Waupaca Library System, where account balances over five dollars freeze access to checking out materials, using public computers, and online services that require a library card login. The data showing that fines are a deterrent to library use is further proved by the fact that in Kaukauna, expired (or non-active) library card fine amount totals are 2.5 times higher than that of the active library card fines. This directly shows that when people have fines, they aren't coming back to the library. Library fines remain on library card accounts indefinitely, unless a library chooses to purge old inactive records.

The driving force behind the national trend of going fine free is the barrier fines create for the people that need library services the most. These vulnerable populations often include people in low income situations, the elderly on fixed incomes, youth and minorities. Children in low-income situations are especially at risk, facing up to a 30-million-word gap than affluent counterparts, according to a study by Hart & Risley. When children with limited vocabularies enter school, studies indicate that they may never catch up academically, falling further behind each year. Being read to remains one of the best ways for preschool children to learn new words. Public libraries serve as a free resource to help combat socioeconomic vocabulary gaps because they offer free access to literacy programming and books.

While it sounds like a simple policy to enact, it does take planning and municipal support. Going fine free is a loss of revenue. While that revenue accounts for less than one percent of the total library operational budget in Kaukauna, it does impact municipal revenue. Nevertheless, Kaukauna Mayor, Tony Penterman, is very passionate about library services for the community and agreed that going fine free sooner rather than later was important. "As Mayor of Kaukauna, my goal is to do what is best for our community. When Director Thiem-Menning



explained the importance of going fine free with support from the Library Board, I knew it was in Kaukauna’s best interests to back them in their policy adoption. We have one of the most beautiful libraries in the state, and all our residents should be able to use it equitably and without barriers. This policy ensures a Kaukauna Strong approach to lifelong learning and education, and we are proud to be the first in the Fox Cities to adopt it,” says Penterman.

There is concern that going to fine free would stop people from returning their books on time. Libraries that have adopted the practice, however, have not reported any issues with books being returned later than normal. With a fine free policy, patrons that don’t return on time are just billed for the late items, but once they come back the bill is removed, and there will be no additional late fines for the tardiness. Almost all libraries that have adopted a fine free policy are reporting more library card sign ups and higher circulation rates. The Kaukauna Public Library will continue to bill for items that are never returned or for items that are returned damaged.

“Our goal is to make sure that everyone that wants to use the library is able to,” says Director Thiem-Menning. Starting January 2nd, library staff will waive existing fines on accounts of Kaukauna Public Library card holders while the library system begins purging old fine records. While this is only for late fee fines, Thiem-Menning says, “Anyone with billed items on their library card that want to be able to use their account should still come in. We always do our best to work with patrons so that they can use their card if they want to.”

There is a longstanding stigma about libraries and bills. Thiem-Menning recalls a patron coming in with a sizable fine that wanted library privileges restored if possible. “The patron couldn’t believe that we were willing to work with them and even said a friend had told them it was crazy to even ask us if the amount could be reduced,” says Thiem-Menning. The patron left that day with tears of gratitude and a valid library card and has been back each week since. As part of going fine free, the Kaukauna Public Library will also accept back any old billed materials and waive late fines associated with them. Patrons with billed items that no longer have the billed materials are also encouraged to speak with library staff about their accounts if they wish to get their library card back in good standing.

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