

## Let them Say Yes! Empowering Frontline Staff to Forgive (Large) Fines and Bills Toolkit

### Pre-Training

- Look over your library's circulation policies. If there is an explicit policy not allowing for fine forgiveness, work with your director or board to change it.
- Read [Removing Barriers to Access](#) by Meg Johnson DePriest.
- Research libraries that have gone totally fine free.
- Ask your frontline staff to track how many times patrons complain about fines and bills in two week span, including about how long each interaction takes.
- Ask your frontline staff how they feel after each of these interactions. Encourage open communication.
- Decide an amount that staff can forgive without having to ask permission. Go big!
- Don't limit it to just fines.
- Resist the temptation to limit the amount of times they can forgive in a day/week/month.

### Getting Frontline Staff Ready

- Tell them you want to empower them to work with patrons to reduce/eliminate their balances if the situation warrants it.
- Ask them how they feel about it. Listen to any concerns they have.
- It's OK if you don't have all the answers right away. Their feedback will help develop the exact procedures.

### Addressing Philosophical Disagreements

- "Fine forgiveness is an abuse of the community's money".
  - "Most patrons who seek forgiveness are members of the community who have paid money into the library. As a public library it is important that we respond to all community members with empathy and equity."
- "Fine forgiveness encourages patrons not be responsible."
  - "Fine forgiveness is about hearing our patrons and showing them that we hear them. Fines overwhelmingly affect patrons living in poverty. It is irresponsible not have fine forgiveness in place."
- "It will actually create more inequity because some staff will forgive all the time, and some staff won't do it at all."
  - "The expectation is that all staff will start patron complaints off with fine forgiveness. We will do initial training and also constant follow up training to make sure frontline staff feel confident and empowered."

### Training Frontline Staff

- Although it may be a big change, keep training simple.
- Avoid creating too many black-and-white rules about fine forgiveness.
  - Because every patron's situation is unique, rules should be general and allow for some interpretation.
  - Rules that are too granular can prevent staff from responding to a new situation.

- Write up common scenarios where staff will be asked to forgive charges. Some staff may want to role play the situations. If they want to, let them.
- Write up common ways to reduce balances on accounts that give guidance but are not hard and fast.
  - Forgiving half the amount to start.
  - Forgiving all fines and bills except the collection agency charge
  - Forgiving all fines and reducing replacement costs to cheapest price.
  - Forgiving old fines.
- Remind them about placing notes in patron accounts about forgiveness over a certain amount.
- During training, remind them that is about equity: working with all patrons so that they all can, within their means and without burden, access the library.

### **When It Kicks Off**

- Check in with staff to see what questions have come up.
- Expect and embrace mistakes staff make.
  - Don't allow mistakes to stop fine forgiveness.
  - Their "mistakes" may actually teach you something.
- Expect most patrons to be happy with the changes. Some may even be surprised at how easily their complaint was handled and resolved. These are the patrons likely to compliment your library in the community.

### **Going Forward**

- When filling frontline positions, look for candidates with a background in positive customer service delivery and/or candidates with strong empathy skills.
- Ask about fine forgiveness situations during the interview. The candidate may not think answering in the affirmative is the correct answer, but observe how they walk you through their decision.
- For current employees, it will take some time for some of them to get comfortable with a shift in procedures (and outlook). Listen to them, keep walking them through why the library has embraced fine forgiveness and empowering staff to take charge of it.

#### *Contact:*

Steve Maesen

Circulation Manager

Kalamazoo Public Library

(269)553-7862

stevem@kpl.gov