



Long Overdue

**Eliminating Fines on Overdue Materials to
Improve Access to San Francisco Public Library**

January 17, 2019

Proposal by the San Francisco Public Library
and San Francisco Financial Justice Project

Overview of the Fine Free Movement



Urban Libraries Council national fine-free map

More than 50 libraries across the country have removed overdue fines entirely or from some accounts.

SFPL spoke with executives from nine libraries about their experiences with fine elimination:

- Salt Lake County Public Library (Utah)
- Denver Public Library (Colorado)
- Berkeley Public Library (California)
- San Diego Public Library (California)
- Saint Paul Public Library (Minnesota)
- Oak Park Public Library (Illinois)
- Nashville Public Library (Tennessee)
- Evansville-Vanderburgh Public Library (Indiana)
- San Jose Public Library (California)

Removing Fines to Support SFPL Priorities

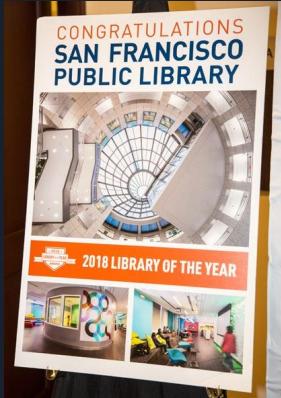
Mission

The San Francisco Public Library system is dedicated to free and equal access to information, knowledge, independent learning and the joys of reading for our diverse community.

Strategic Plan

2016-2021 Strategic Plan: Be the Premier Public Library in the Nation

"Partner with the Financial Justice Project to institute a-free service model, eliminating overdue fines for library collections."



Rationale for Eliminating Fines

The current use of overdue fines in SFPL does not align with the library's mission and goals.

Overdue fines:

- Restrict access and exacerbate inequality
- Disproportionately affect low -income populations, racial-minority communities, and those without college degrees
- Create conflict between patrons and the library
- Require an inefficient use of staff time
- Do not consistently ensure borrowed materials end up back on library shelves

SFPL's Journey toward Fine Free

No overdue fines on Juvenile and Teen accounts since 1974

Four amnesty periods in the last two decades

- Recovered 745,000 overdue and billed items
- Reduced outstanding debt by \$400,000

2018 collections campaign with Treasurer & Tax Collector

- Recovered 5,160 billed items
- Reduced outstanding debt by \$326,000





Methodology

- **Literature review** : news coverage, academic research, library websites
- **Peer library interviews** : nine interviews with libraries across the country
- **SFPL Staff survey**
- **Patron survey**
- **SFPL data analysis** how fines impact patrons and library operations currently



Fines As A Barrier to Access

At any time, **35% of patrons owe money** because they missed their due date

Average SFPL adult patron **owes \$23.40** in fines and fees

5% of accounts are blocked due to unpaid fines (17,500)

“Patrons are so grateful whenever we work with them to reduce or remove fines. Fear of accruing fines also makes some potential patrons hesitant to open a library account.”

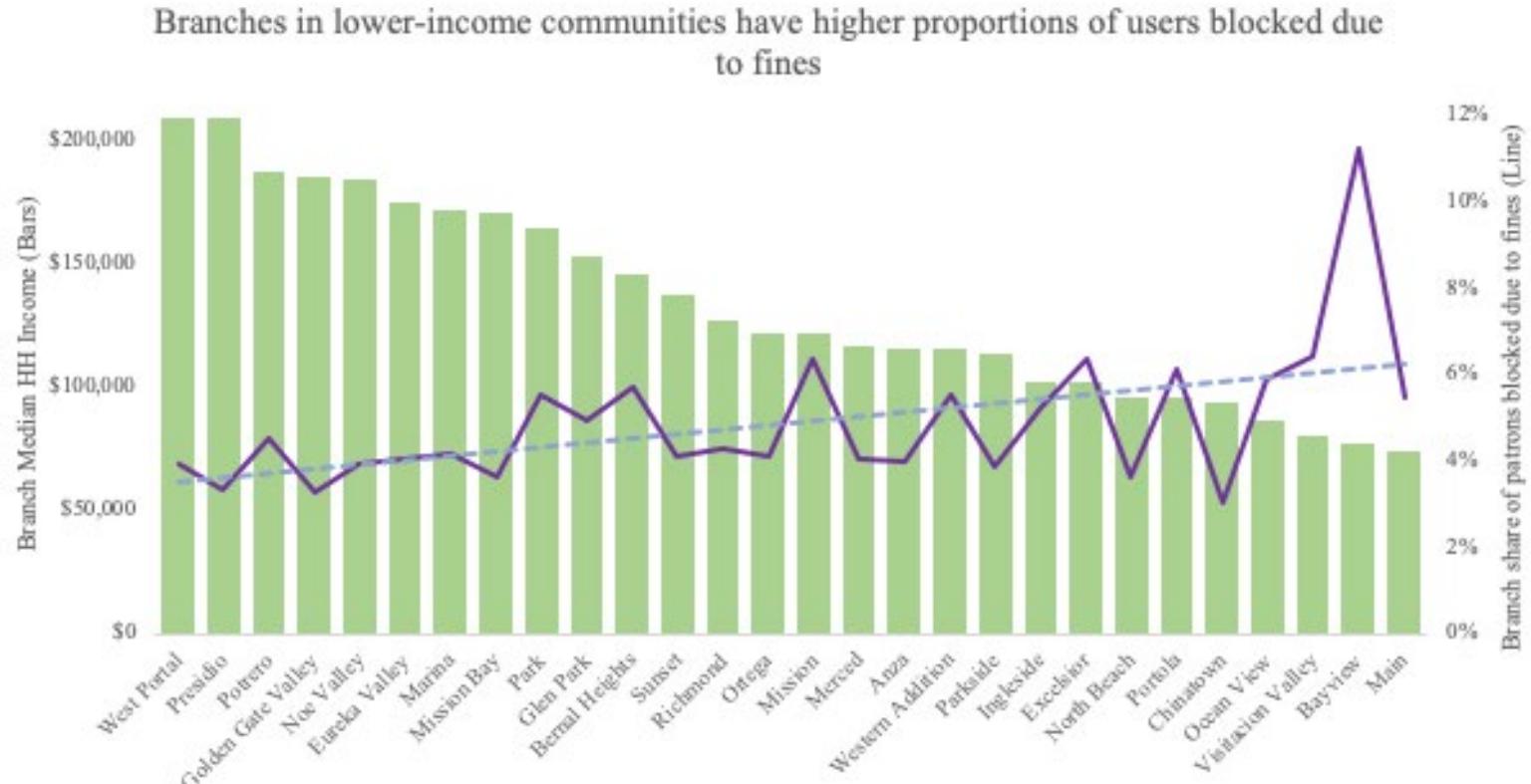
- SFPL Branch Circulation Staff

“I support eliminating fines because some people simply can't afford to pay them. They are then prevented from using the library at all. I'm one of those people. While I still enjoy using the e-library system, I haven't been able to check out books for years because I can't afford to pay the fines on my account from when I got sick and couldn't get books returned on time.”

- SFPL patron at Main Library

Overdue Fines Disproportionately Affect Low-Income San Franciscans

-Income



Improving Patron Relationships with SFPL

86% of patron survey respondents expect they would have a better relationship with the library if fines went away

81% of staff survey respondents had been involved in or witnessed a conflict with a patron over fines



"[Fines] create a sense of unbelonging, which is counterproductive vis-à-vis any sort of community building or outreach efforts, which I think of as an integral role for public libraries. "

- SFPL patron at Park branch

Optimizing SFPL Staff Time

SFPL staff handle **69,000 fine transactions** in a year; that's nearly 200 per day

Staff survey respondents estimated they spend **17 minutes per day collecting fines**



Fine collection consumes between 1,150 and 3,460 hours of SFPL staff time annually

Based on range of 3 minutes per transaction

That corresponds to between \$64,000 and \$191,000 worth of staff capacity

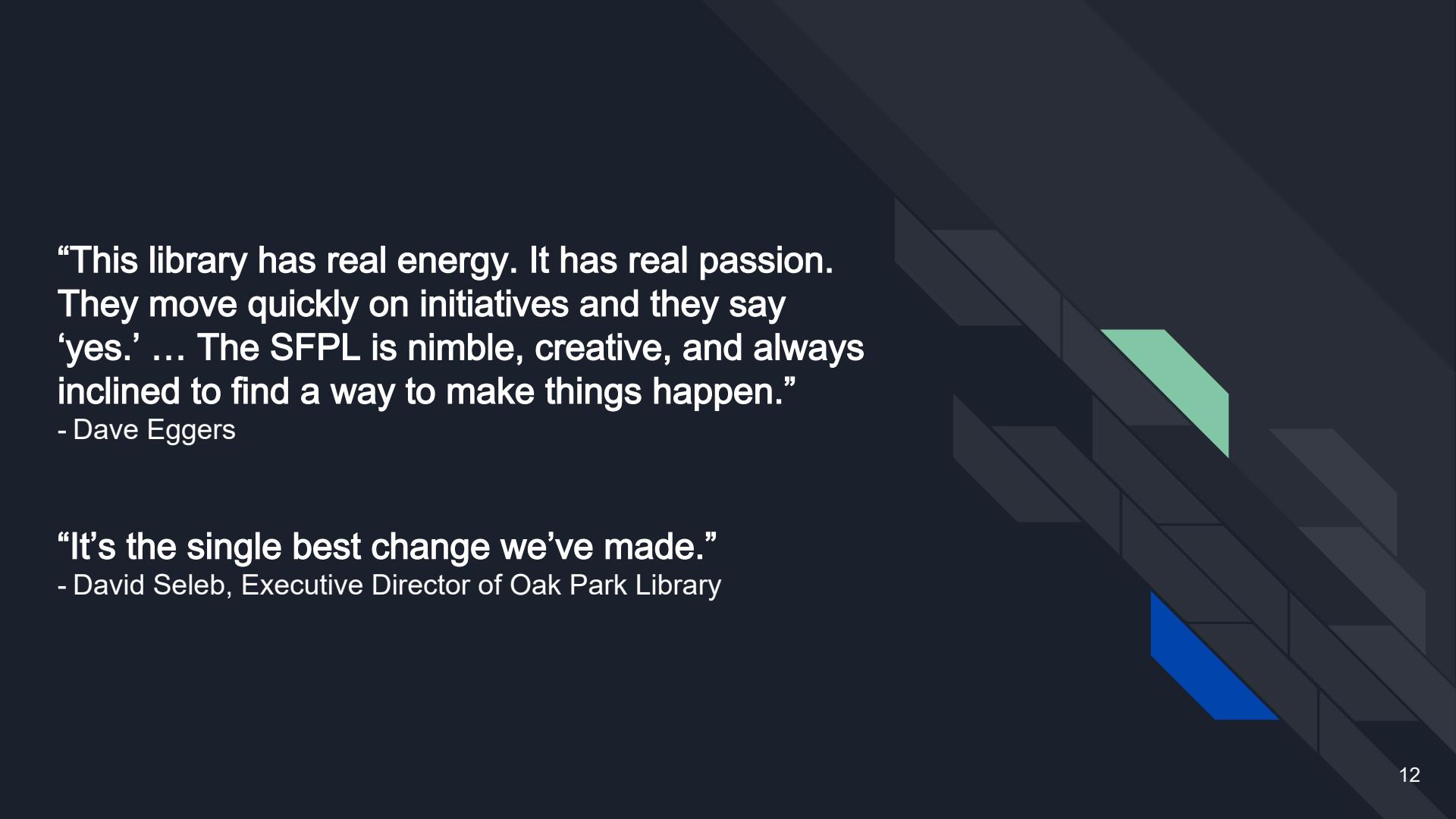
“Elimination of overdue fines would improve overall patron service and experience. Time not spent dealing with overdue fines could be better spent.”

- SFPL Main circulation staff



SFPL Should Make the Following Policy Changes

1. Remove **overdue fines** from Adult and Senior accounts
2. Implement **Automatic Renewal** to give patrons more time with their materials
3. Accelerate **billed status initiation** to 21 days past due, down from 60 days currently
4. Increase **the frequency and number of late item notices** before items move to billed
5. Communicate **proactively** with SFPL staff and patrons about any changes



“This library has real energy. It has real passion. They move quickly on initiatives and they say ‘yes.’ ... The SFPL is nimble, creative, and always inclined to find a way to make things happen.”

- Dave Eggers

“It’s the single best change we’ve made.”

- David Seleb, Executive Director of Oak Park Library