

ECONOMIC BARRIERS TO INFORMATION ACCESS

An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*

The essential mission of a publicly funded library is to provide free, equal, and equitable access to information in all its forms. While the roles, goals, and objectives of publicly supported libraries may differ, they all share this common mission. Just as economic issues may challenge the library's ability to meet its mission, economic barriers may also threaten user access.

Those who work in libraries and serve on their governing bodies sometimes face economic pressures and competition for funding but must remain committed to the library's essential mission. To sustain this mission, the American Library Association has enumerated certain principles of library services in the *Library Bill of Rights* and associated policy statements.

Article V of the *Library Bill of Rights* states, "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views."

The American Library Association fundamentally opposes the creation of economic barriers to access services and resources provided by publicly funded libraries, including public, school, and academic libraries. All resources provided directly or indirectly by the library, regardless of format or method of delivery, should be readily and equitably accessible to all library users. Imposing any financial barrier may disadvantage users, and libraries of all types—public, school, and academic—should consider eliminating barriers that limit access to library resources and other services.

Libraries should systematically monitor their programs and services for potential barriers to access and strive to eliminate them when they occur. Libraries should design and implement services with care so as not to infringe upon access to or delivery of information and resources for all users. Services should be reevaluated regularly to ensure that the library's essential mission remains uncompromised.

The "Resolution on Monetary Library Fines as a Form of Social Inequity" states that monetary library fines create a barrier to the provision of library and information services.¹ Libraries should examine policies and procedures, particularly those involving fines, fees, or other user charges, and actively move toward eliminating any that may create potential barriers to access or academic achievement. If a library has a policy to charge a user for lost, stolen, or willfully damaged materials or property, it should consider waiving or reducing the cost, at its discretion, based on that user's ability to pay. Likewise the library should consider a user's ability to pay

when it charges a flat annual fee for borrowing privileges to people living outside the tax-support area of the library.

Economic barriers are not limited solely to financial constraints and a user's ability to pay fines or fees. Many policies and procedures may disproportionately harm those having financial difficulties, experiencing homelessness, or those from marginalized communities. These policies may include those related to personal belongings, hygiene requirements, verification of a permanent address, access to an email account or computer. Such policies and procedures effectively abridge or deny access for some members of the community because they reinforce distinctions among users.

Libraries and their governing bodies should look for alternative models and methods of administration that minimize distinctions among users based on their economic status. They should resist imposing user fees to alleviate financial pressures on the library, as those fees may impose a long-term cost to institutional integrity and public confidence in libraries. Likewise, they should not enact policies that cater to the desires of the economically fortunate at the expense of the economically unfortunate.

The American Library Association opposes any legislative or regulatory attempt to impose content restrictions on library resources or to limit user access to resources or services as a condition of funding publicly supported libraries and information services.

Libraries and their governing bodies should carefully examine terms or conditions attached to library funding and should oppose conditions that might limit full and equal access to content. This principle applies equally to private gifts or bequests and to public funds. In particular, libraries and their governing bodies have an obligation to reject such restrictions when the effect of the restriction is to limit equal and equitable access to information.

Libraries and their governing bodies should cooperate with efforts to create a community consensus that publicly supported libraries require funding unfettered by conditions that limit full and equal access to content. Such a consensus supports the library mission to provide the free and unrestricted exchange of information and ideas.

¹ "Resolution on Monetary Library Fines as a Form of Social Inequity," adopted by ALA Council January 28, 2019.

Adopted June 30, 1993, by the ALA Council and amended June 25, 2019.

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