

Calvert Library to pilot 'No Late Fees' program

Posted by [Alan Van Wormer](#) On 02/28/2019

PRINCE FREDERICK, Md. - Calvert Library's Board of Library Trustees (BOLT) has voted to begin a four-month pilot of "no late fees" for Calvert Library checkouts beginning in March. According to Board President Carolyn McHugh, "The American Library Association passed a resolution in January encouraging libraries to move toward eliminating fines. Our Board has been in discussion about this for over a year, and we are ready to try it out and see how it goes for our community." The resolution states that monetary fines create barriers to information access and do not serve the core mission of the modern library. Ms. McHugh said, "Calvert Library plays a critical role in early literacy from birth through preschool age when brains are growing the most. We inspire student excitement about learning and help build academic success that is a strong precursor to financial success. The library helps customers build job skills and connect to resources that may enable them to create successful businesses or improve the community. We want all Calvert Countians to have access to library services and to feel comfortable using the library. We want Calvert to experience the economic and quality-of-life benefits that accessible lifelong-education provides to the community. We realize a four-month trial is pretty short so we hope our customers will help spread the word. We'll revisit the process in June and determine if any tweaks need to be made."

Materials shared in the tri-county area checked out at Calvert Library locations will not incur late fees. Materials obtained from other libraries in the state will continue to accrue late fees. Automatic renewal will continue for four circulation cycles if no one is waiting for the item.

Overdue fines amount to less than \$35,000 a year for Calvert Library, which is less than 1% of the library's annual budget. When asked whether the library will try to recoup that loss in some way, Ms. McHugh said, "Library staff are pursuing passport processing as a possible income generator. We could offer hours that are not available at our post offices that will help our many Calvert Countians with scheduling challenges."

Calvert Library Executive Director Carrie Willson and BOLT members presented their proposal to the Board of County Commissioners at the December 4, 2018 meeting. Commissioner Pat Nutter raised concerns about materials, particularly those high-demand items like DVDs, being returned in a timely manner. The library plans to address this by accelerating the timeline for when an item would be marked "lost" and thus billed to the customer. Currently, an item could be 45 days overdue without being billed. The new proposal considers an item lost at 14 days overdue. If the item is returned in a timely manner, the bill for the item is removed. According to Ms. Willson, "Most people are not motivated by a 25 cent fine. They are motivated because they want to use library materials. By marking items lost more quickly, customers are more likely to find them, return them and be able to check out other material." Ms. McHugh adds, "We feel confident that mutual respect and even self-interest will get library materials returned quickly. After all, the person waiting to read the book you have is probably reading something you want to read next. It's simple cooperation." Because items will be billed more quickly, customers will be encouraged to sign up for email or text reminders from the library.

Currently, the library has about 25,000 active cardholders, which represent about a 38% household penetration. Monthly total circulation this time of year is between 70,000-90,000. The hope is that all of these numbers will rise over the course of the pilot. The BOLT will also be evaluating return timeframes. Currently about 2000 items are overdue by a week, 1700 items are overdue by 14 days and 1200 items are long overdue (>45 days). When asked what success will look like, Circulation Supervisor Carolyn Lenz said, "Customers will be comfortable checking out all the materials they want rather than just how many they can afford if they miss the return date by a day or two. They will bring them back in a timely manner so we can continue with the pilot. We will have enough of our collection checked out that we have shelf space for face-out and browsable books so customers can see those gems that have been hidden. We will see customers we haven't seen in a while come in to check out what's changed. Staff will not have to give customers bad news about overdue fines. Rather than spending time manning the cash register, staff will be available to help customers pick their next read, lead a lunchtime book discussion at an elementary school or help someone find the information they need."

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