

Economic Barriers to Library Access: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights

The core mission of most libraries, and particularly publicly funded libraries, is to provide free, equal, and equitable access to all types of information. While libraries may have different roles, goals, and objectives, this mission is shared by all. Economic challenges can affect a library's ability to fulfill this mission and can also create barriers for individual users.

Libraries and their governing bodies sometimes face economic pressure and competition for funding. Even so, they must remain committed to the library's core mission. To support this mission, the American Library Association (ALA) offers guidance in the *Library Bill of Rights* and related policies. In particular, 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 ALA opposes economic barriers for access to services and resources in all publicly funded libraries. All library resources should be accessible to all users, regardless of format or delivery method. This ensures equitable access for everyone. Libraries should not impose any financial barriers that may disadvantage users. Libraries of all types should eliminate barriers that limit access to library resources and services.

Libraries should thoughtfully design services to deliver information and resources equitably to all users. They should regularly review these services to ensure that the library's core mission stays intact.

The "Resolution on Monetary Library Fines as a Form of Social Inequity" states that fines create a barrier to accessing library services.^[1] Libraries should review policies and procedures related to fines, fees, or other user charges.

Libraries should work to remove any policies that create barriers to access or academic success. They should also consider waiving or reducing fees for individuals based on their ability to pay. This may include fees for:

- lost or damaged items;
- borrowing fees for non-residents; or
- program participation.

Economic barriers go beyond a user's ability to pay fines or fees. Many policies and procedures unfairly harm people who:

- are struggling financially;
- are experiencing homelessness; or
- come from marginalized communities.
- Examples of such policies include those about:
 - personal belongings;
 - hygiene requirements;
 - verifying a permanent address; and
 - accessing an email account, phone number, or computer.

These policies can restrict or deny access for some community members by singling out certain users and reinforcing inequalities.

Libraries and their governing bodies should find other ways to reduce differences between users based on economic status. They should resist charging user fees to address financial pressures, as these can harm public trust and the library's integrity. Policies should not favor those who are economically fortunate at the expense of those who are not.

The ALA opposes any laws or regulations that impose content restrictions on library resources as a condition of funding. It also opposes efforts to limit user access to resources or services tied to funding for publicly supported libraries.

Libraries and their governing bodies should review all terms and conditions attached to funding or gifts, whether from public or private sources. They should reject any conditions that limit equal or equitable access to content. They should also work to build community agreement that libraries require funding free from conditions that limit equal or equitable access to content. Such an agreement supports the library's mission of providing free and open exchange of information and ideas.

Notes

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