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Fine Forgiveness: Transparency, Accountability, and Policy-Based Practice

| *Can library staff forgive fines and fees?*

Overview

Yes, but only if the library has a clear, board-approved policy in place. Forgiveness must be applied fairly, documented properly, and used in a way that supports accountability. What libraries can't do is remove fines without a record or explanation.

When staff forgive a fine, it reduces the balance to \$0 while keeping the original charge available for review. This allows the library to maintain a complete and transparent record. Quietly wiping out fines without a history, even if they were charged by mistake, creates problems for audits, internal reviews, and transparency.

Why This Matters

Libraries in the OWWL Library System no longer have the ability to void or zero out fines. This was a deliberate decision to improve financial controls and make sure there's always a traceable record of what happened. Forgiving a fine (with a note about why) protects both the library and the patron. It also ensures that all adjustments, even small ones, can be reviewed later if needed.

What the State Comptroller Says

The Office of the State Comptroller (OSC) frequently reminds public libraries that:

- Adjustments to fines and fees must be properly authorized and clearly documented
- Internal controls matter, especially for anything involving money
- Libraries should have policies in place that are consistently applied

“[The Board Should:]1. Ensure that comprehensive written policies and procedures are established that provide adequate guidance and internal controls over collecting, remitting and

depositing over-the-counter cash receipts, and waiving fines and fees.”
— OSC Audit: Seymour Public Library District, 2015¹

Policy is Key

In order to forgive fines, your library must have a written policy that outlines:

- When a fine can be forgiven (e.g., staff error, hardship, etc.)
- Who can forgive fines (usually the director or designated staff)
- How forgiveness should be documented

This protects against arbitrary decisions and helps make sure all patrons are treated fairly.

What Good Forgiveness Practices Look Like

Situation	What to Do	What to Record
Fine was issued in error	Forgive the fine	Add a note explaining the error with staff initials and date
Patron is experiencing hardship	Forgive if allowed by policy	Use a consistent note or code in the ILS
One-time courtesy	Only forgive if your policy allows	Note that it's a first-time or one-time forgiveness
Library forgives all fines	Forgive per policy	Follow local notation required by policy
Other issue	Forgive per policy	Include a short explanation and date

All forgiveness actions should be documented in a way that makes sense later. If someone reviews the account six months from now, they should be able to tell what happened and why.

Why We Don't Void Fines

We no longer allow that, and for good reason. Erasing fines removes the record entirely, which makes it hard to track what happened. This creates risk for audits and raises questions about fairness and accountability.

This was recognized in 2013 by OWWL Advisory Committee (OWWLAC) when the committee enacted a policy reflecting the longstanding recommendation to forgive all fines for a which a patron is not being held responsible². In late 2024/early 2025, the Evergreen Advisory Committee

¹ <https://www.osc.ny.gov/files/local-government/audits/2017-11/lgsa-audit-library-2015-seymour.pdf>

² https://docs.owwl.org/Evergreen/OwwlPolicy#A_34Forgive_34_payment_type

(EAC) and OWWL Directors Advisory Committee (OWWLDAC) approved removing permissions to void fines and adjust to zero to align what is technically possible with the established policy³.

The forgiveness option gives libraries flexibility without sacrificing transparency.

What Libraries Should Do Now

- Review your current approach to forgiving fines
- Make sure your library has a written policy approved by your board
- Train staff to follow the policy and document all forgiven fines
- Contact the System if you'd like help drafting a policy or reviewing your current practice

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Disclaimer: While the information provided reflects the OWWL Library System's interpretation of relevant legal principles, it does not constitute legal advice. Libraries are encouraged to consult with an attorney to ensure the best course of action for your unique situation.

³ OWWLDAC Meeting Minutes, January 3, 2025

<https://docs.owwl.org/pub/Members/DirectorsAdvisoryCouncilAgendaMarch72025/OWWLDAC%20Meeting%20Minutes%20January%203rd%20version%202.pdf>