



The Pathfinder

Newsletter of the Pioneer Library System

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There's Nothing Free About Direct Access

by Debbie Coover

In late January, State Librarian Janet Welch sent to each Public Library and Library System Board President and Director a packet of information on Commissioner's Regulation 90.3. Included in that packet were copies of recommendations made to the Board of Regents to deal with the issue of Free Direct Access to library services by all residents of a public library system. Late last November the Regents approved release of the recommendations.

Recommendations include:

- maintaining the traditional principle of library service without charge to the individual
- encouraging communities to provide adequate support for libraries
- ending overuse of libraries by non-residents

Specifics of the Recommendations:

No Charges for Onsite Access or for Library Cards

This continues current regulation, which does not allow any public or association library chartered by the Regents and registered by SED, to charge individuals or families for on-site access no matter where they live. Nor may member libraries charge any families or individuals living within the System service area for library cards.

Restrictions on Borrowing of Materials and Use of Services

Systems would need to incorporate into their Plan of Service a mechanism for member library relief for over-use by allowing member libraries to restrict borrowing of materials and use of services. For member libraries wishing to implement restrictions beyond those covered in the Regulation, Systems could apply to the Commissioner for relief— after approval by 2/3 of the members.

Withholding Library Services to Residents of Unserved Jurisdictions

This continues the current regulation, allowing libraries to charge Library System residents of any municipality of over 10,000 that does not support a public library. It also proposes allowing Systems petition the Commissioner on behalf of a member to withhold library services from residents of a jurisdiction of fewer than 10,000 that does not choose to establish a library or contract for library services. The petition must be approved by 2/3 of the members.

Identifying System Services to Residents of Unserved Jurisdictions

Systems must develop a Plan that proposes actions to bring library services to all geographic areas in the System and that describes how they will deliver library services and materials to people living in unserved areas.

What Will This Mean For Pioneer?

If implemented as proposed, the changes in Regulation will not really address many of the problems with access. The fact remains that public library service is not mandated in this state, and municipalities are therefore not required to supply it. It has been my experience that not all elected bodies focus on doing the right thing. And libraries are not always on the list of their top priorities. Until the state mandates public library service, as it now mandates public education, problems of inequities in both desire and ability of local municipalities to pay for library service will remain huge issues. What it will continue to do is perpetuate the ability of residents to get library service, whether they pay for it or not.

Questions of Fairness Continue to Exist

- We need to ask the state officials and legislators how they justify insisting on free and direct access to public libraries (supplying a very small percent of operating costs) while at the same time allowing school districts to charge non-residents tuition, even though the state supplies up to 80% of the funding for that school district?
- And we need to ask how, with inadequate funding of public libraries, Systems can hope to provide service to areas that do not tax themselves to provide service?
- And why is a municipal size of 10,000 still used as a trigger; are rural residents less deserving of good library service?

What is absolutely clear is that we in Pioneer will need to have prolonged and thorough discussion on what we can and should do. Meanwhile, we need to continue to let the public know that library services are not free, that these are public services which should be supported by all taxpayers— as much a part of the public good as the rest of the educational community, and that libraries can no longer afford to do more with less. Until we insist on adequate and equitable support, libraries in many communities will continue to be faced with huge funding problems. And we need to send a message to the State that issues of fairness need to be addressed now.