City Council
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Legislation Details (With Text)

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Title:	Authorizing the Committee on Legislative Oversight to hold hearings exploring the Free Library of Philadelphia stopping fines for people with overdue books and wiping away patrons' outstanding debt.				
Sponsors:	Councilmember Parker, Councilmember Gym, Councilmember Henon, Council President Clarke, Councilmember Domb, Councilmember Squilla, Councilmember Reynolds Brown, Councilmember Johnson, Councilmember Taubenberger				
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11/20/2019	0	Legislative Oversight Committee	HEARING NOTICES SENT		
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10/3/2019	0	CITY COUNCIL			
10/3/2019	0	CITY COUNCIL			

Authorizing the Committee on Legislative Oversight to hold hearings exploring the Free Library of Philadelphia stopping fines for people with overdue books and wiping away patrons' outstanding debt.

WHEREAS, On Monday, September 30th, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced that Chicago public libraries will stop fining people for overdue books and wipe away patrons' outstanding debt, a move that makes the City the largest of more than 200 municipalities across the country to do so; and

WHEREAS, Mayor Lightfoot said she wants to help low-income people regain access to the system that has blocked them from borrowing materials because they have hit the threshold of $10 in fees; and

WHEREAS, According to *The Chicago Tribune*, research cited by the American Library Association and the Urban Libraries Council suggests eliminating overdue fees should increase overall book return rates and overall circulation rates - meaning more books in the hands of more people; and

WHEREAS, Before Chicago announced that it will stop fining people for overdue books, the City twice tried temporary amnesty programs, in 2012 and 2016, wiping out hundreds of thousands of dollars in late fees with the goal of recuperating missing materials. In 2012, the City wrote off $600,000 in fines, and those who had been locked out of the system brought back about $2 million worth of missing books; and

WHEREAS, Instead of doing another amnesty program and likely continuing to do amnesty programs every few years, Chicago decided to go fine-free; and

WHEREAS, Curtis Rogers, a spokesman for Washington, D.C.-based Urban Libraries Council, stated, "I can

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say this with complete confidence: I have been following these stories of the growing trend towards eliminating fines at library systems across the country very closely for the last year, and I'm not aware of any library systems that have experienced serious negative consequences after going fine-free"; and

WHEREAS, Library fines are regressive and overwhelmingly impact lower-income communities. For example, 1 in 3 patrons in the Chicago library's South District (a lower-income neighborhood) currently are unable to check out items because they owe $10 or more in fines and fees. In the North District (a higher-income neighborhood), this number drops to 1 in 6. Data shows residents on the North Side more often use digital materials, which includes books that can be downloaded to Kindle devices or other e-readers, and which take an initial investment from residents that not everyone can afford. Digital copies do not incur fines but rather are deleted from a device when they become overdue - often meaning those with potentially the greatest ability to pay the fines are not faced with them in the first place; and

WHEREAS, Not only do library fines overwhelmingly impact lower-income communities, but they also greatly impact children. Curtis Rogers from the Urban Libraries Council explained that according to library data, 20 percent of suspended library cards belong to children younger than 14. He also said that studies have shown libraries are consistently rated as the most trusted public institutions. But fining people, especially children and economically disadvantaged groups, can undermine that trust. Rogers clearly stated, "Fines don't teach responsibility. They just reinforce the difference between people who are able to pay for a common mistake and those who aren't"; and

WHEREAS, Patrick Molloy, a spokesman for Chicago's library system, echoed that sentiment by saying, "Once people get fines that they can't pay, they choose not to come back at all, so the materials also don't come back. Fines truthfully haven't been a revenue stream and weren't designed to be a revenue stream. It was supposed to be an incentive to get the materials back, and the research shows that's just not the case"; and

WHEREAS, Another subpopulation that is likely overwhelmingly impacted by library fines is undocumented immigrants and their families. Many of these individuals already do not trust governmental entities, and when they are faced with a potential penalty, they instead choose to just not engage with the institution at all; and

WHEREAS, Philadelphia is long overdue with the need to explore the Free Library stopping fines for people with overdue books and wiping away patrons' outstanding debt. The Free Library collects only about $400,000 annually from fines, down from about $700,000 a few years ago; and

WHEREAS, The Free Library should be commended for already removing fines for children. As of July 16, 2013, children under 12 years old are no longer charged late fees for overdue materials - though they are still responsible for returning all items before checking out more. Children are also able to check out a total of 20 items and renew their materials up to 10 times, an increase over the previous limit of three renewals; and

WHEREAS, While City Council has not completed a formal study, it is highly probable that the people who continue to be most negatively impacted by library fines in Philadelphia include lower-income individuals and immigrants. These are people that, at the very least, deserve equal access to our City's library system; now therefore be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That it hereby authorizes the Committee on Legislative Oversight to hold hearings exploring the Free Library of Philadelphia stopping fines for people with overdue books and wiping away patrons' outstanding debt.

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