

Testimony in support of SB 524, Public Libraries – Building Lifelong Learners Act
Hearing before the Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
February 12, 2020

Charles “Skip” Auld, CEO, Anne Arundel County Public Library System

Dear Chairman Pinsky. Vice-Chair Kagan and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

I’m testifying in support, with amendments, of SB 524 – The Building Lifelong Learners Act. Thanks to support from our County Executive and Council, Anne Arundel County Public Library went fine free for children’s and teen materials in January and waived past fines to give many of our customers a clean slate.

I’d like to share a story of how we are already seeing the impact this policy change is making in the lives of our residents. Last month, a mom came into our Maryland City at Russett Library with credit card and an apology in hand. She and her children had checked out DVDs and books in the summer but then were faced with an unexpected crisis and hospitalization. Of course, returning library materials was the farthest thing from her mind. Her account was referred to collections and she had received several notices.

Her children missed the library and wanted to check out books, but she made excuses and never brought them back because she was embarrassed. After the new year, she “found money” and was fully prepared to pay the more than \$300 in fines and fees for the items that were overdue so her family could use the library again. She didn’t know about the amnesty or the change to the library’s fine policy. When she found out that she only had to pay the \$20 referral fee for being sent to collections, she was so overcome with relief and joy that she cried. She thanked us profusely because her children could once again enjoy all that the library had to offer. This is why we do what we do – to serve our community and break down barriers to access.

Before we launched this program, 20% of all children’s library cards in our county were blocked because of overdue fines. Those boys and girls from Brooklyn Park, Annapolis, Deale and countless cities and towns in Anne Arundel County couldn’t check out a beloved copy of Where the Sidewalk Ends or Harry Potter. These same kids couldn’t take advantage of free online tutoring or use library computers. We believed this was unacceptable and wanted to do something about it.

Overdue fines place a paralyzing burden on lower-income families. My wife, formerly a librarian, still speaks about her experience working the circulation desk in a Richmond Library 10 years ago. Often, there would be two Moms in line. The first one would have armloads of books for her kids to take home. The second Mom would have a single book and tell her child, “We can only take out this one book and when you’re finished, we’ll bring it back and get another one.”

This miserly, or scarcity, approach to her family’s reading was because of experience at the library with overdue fees being charged that meant making the decision one week or another to either buy groceries or pay overdue fines. A \$5 or \$10 fine which can easily be paid by middle-income families is a real burden on lower-income families. Whereas the middle-income family

can think “I’m helping the library,” the lower-income family must decide between basic necessities and using the library.

We want to promote robust use of the library. Especially for the success of our children. Study after study shows that reading, learning and playing are absolutely critical to early learning that sets the stage for lifelong accomplishment. Getting rid of overdue fines throughout the State of Maryland will go a long way toward enabling these results.

Why is this issue coming up now? In the case of Anne Arundel, we became aware of St. Paul Public Library getting rid of fines in 2017 and Columbus, Ohio doing the same a year earlier. Many other libraries in Maryland have been getting rid of overdue fines, and some have wanted to do so but need to be able to replace at least part of the revenue given up by going fine-free. You can help them better serve their communities.

In Anne Arundel County, we are taking things one step further. Our FY2021 county budget request asks for funding to replace revenue to allow us to go fine free for all 570,000 residents. We believe it’s the natural next step to breaking down barriers to access, leveling the playing field of all residents and opens up the tremendous services and resources the library has to offer to those who need it most.

The impact of these actions is enormous, and I commend the General Assembly for considering SB524 to eliminate fines for all children and teens throughout the State of Maryland. I support the friendly amendments that are being negotiated with the Maryland Association of Public Library Administrators. Thank you Senator Elfreth and all the sponsors for your efforts to help make more families library users again.