

Love Your Library?

Keep It Well Stocked By Returning Items Checked Out

By Tammy T. Pomplun

Cost of a library card: \$0.

Failure to return library materials on time: Small fine.

Failure to ever return library materials or pay for the lost/damaged materials: \$361 fine on a theft charge in Municipal or Circuit Court plus restitution.

Wisdom to contact librarian to make arrangements on lost/damaged items: Priceless.

A handful of people right here in Evansville have been charged with theft of library materials over the past year, a misdemeanor with a fine of up to \$361 plus restitution (State Statute 943.61) for *each item* that is not returned. The situation could have been worse ó a class H felony if the value of the items exceeds \$2500 ó but it could have been avoided altogether.

“People need to return borrowed items to the library. This is a lending library and we need to share with everyone. It’s not fair when people take things and don’t return them,” said Eager Free Public Library Director Kathi Kemp.

“We pay that money out of city funds and those funds come from the taxpayers. I want to protect the city’s investment. This is city property, it belongs to everybody in Evansville, and if it’s not returned, it’s not available to other people,” she pointed out.

Library staff make every effort to contact borrowers with overdue items and to make payment arrangements when items are lost or damaged. More than three contacts are made advising the borrower of the past due item, through phone call, email or mail and the library director sends a personal letter before the police are contacted. “Really, the library just wants its materials back,” said Ms. Kemp. “We give people plenty of opportunity to make affordable arrangements for payments on lost or damaged items. We don’t want to create a financial hardship, but if we don’t get our stuff back, we have to replace it, and that’s money out of our budget. We should be spending money on new things, not replacing materials.”

Evansville Police Officer Patrick Reese said some people have thought it was a joke. “People laugh that someone is getting sent to jail for library fines ó but they’re not the late fines they are being sent to jail for ó they are sent to jail for failing to pay a theft fine.”

“It’s no different than stealing from the Piggly Wiggly or Ace Hardware, and in fact, some items stolen from those places have less value than the items stolen from the library, said Officer Reese.

Some people have owed well over \$200 worth of library materials for items not returned. Most books cost about \$25, but it’s not unusual for some library books to cost \$50 to \$100 apiece nowadays. With DVDs costing about \$20 each and books on CD averaging \$90, just a few items can add up fast. There is no limit to the number of materials a borrower may check out (except for DVDs). While Eager Free Public Library hasn’t had to forward any cases to Circuit Court for a felony charge (theft of materials over \$2500), one person had to make restitution of \$1,000 for materials and pay

additional court fines and costs for materials she didn't return and had actually sold at a rummage sale. If one doesn't pay the courts and make restitution, of course, jail time is a possibility.

“Please contact the library to make payment arrangements. The library is really good at working with people in making arrangements. If all they can afford is \$15 a month, we'll work with them as long as they continue to make payments. We're not trying to make a financial burden, but we do need to replace items,” said Ms. Kemp. Even if one can only pay \$5 a month, that shows good faith.

Officer Reese agrees. “The library goes above and beyond being nice. The point is, you have to make an effort to come in and talk to somebody.”

“It's not just the cost of the item, it's our time in re-cataloging those items. There's expense involved in every step of the way. We'd rather just avoid it. Please just bring our stuff back. The basic core of the library is you borrow things, you bring them back.”

Oftentimes when borrowers move, they forget to make a change of address with the library, so it could be that they don't receive the past-due notices. In that case, the Police Department assists. Library card applications specify that borrowers are to notify the library upon change of address. Parents accept responsibility for items their minor child borrows when they sign for their child to have a library card.

Library staff understand that people have a lot of things going on in their lives. “We totally get that,” said Officer Reese. “Honest people sometimes make mistakes, it becomes dishonest when you start ignoring notices and that shows intent to deprive the library and that's where it turns illegal.”

“We don't want to harass anybody, but we do need to get our stuff back. Just get in touch with us, it goes a long way.”