

Norfolk Insider

City of Norfolk, NE

www.ci.norfolk.ne.us

January 26, 2012

“Library Protects Against Stolen Materials”



A shopper slips an item into his pocket and tries to slip out of the store only to be stopped and subsequently detained by the management for shoplifting. A person keeps library materials far past the due date, the library knows exactly who they are but is still unable to get the materials back.

That was fifteen years ago when the Norfolk Public Library was losing 120 books per month from patrons who weren't returning materials. With an average price then of \$16 per book, the library was

losing \$21,000 per year in inventory.

That's when then library director Ted Smith decided to take a more direct approach to the problem. He, along with City of Norfolk Attorney Clint Schukei, wrote up a city ordinance stating that those who didn't return library materials would be prosecuted.

“It's a big deal for every library. The price of a library item averages about \$22. Audio books and some video games that are checked out easily run from \$50 to \$100 or more. Lost library materials can be a huge expense for a library,” said Michael Caldararo, current Norfolk Public Library director.

The ordinance (12.5-9, Unlawful Library Conduct 1997) outlines the procedure under which people will be prosecuted for not returning library materials.

Books can be checked out by patrons holding a current library card for a two week period with audio visual materials like CDs, DVDs, and video games allowed to be checked out for one week at a time. After that period is over, the library patron can renew print materials two more times with a total amount of time to check out books of six weeks.

“People can come into the library and renew their library items or renew them online or by calling the library. We work with people so they have as much time as they need to use the materials,” Caldararo said.

If a library item is not returned, the library will use an automated system to send out a notice within a week of the due date. If the item is still not returned within two weeks of the due date, the library will send out another reminder that the item must be returned.

If 35 days pass after the due date and the item hasn't been returned, the patron will receive a letter from the library saying they have seven days to get the materials back to the library or their name and case will be referred to the city attorney. If they still fail to return the library materials, information is forwarded to the city attorney's office for prosecution. Only after approximately two months of reminders to return the library materials with no response does the case make its way to prosecution.

"We make every effort to not get to the point where a person has to appear in court. We'll call them and freeze their accounts in the hopes of getting their attention. When they get their library cards, we insist on current contact information so that we can let them know if they've forgotten they had not returned their library materials," Caldararo said.

Caldararo said once a library patron receives a letter from the Norfolk city attorney's office to appear for failing to return library materials, they will usually get the items back to the library or pay for what was lost.

He said the library prefers that people let the library know if they are still looking for the book or are unable to pay for the materials. In some cases the library has allowed people to pay for lost library materials in increments.

"As long as we have communication with people about the materials, we're willing to work with them. They might be on vacation and are unable to get the items back. We understand some people forget they've got one of our books on their shelf. We'll bend over backwards to accommodate them," Caldararo said.

Caldararo said that projections of current usage and average material values would likely place the library's losses at approximately 140 items per month, or \$3080, if the library wasn't proactive about protecting materials. Instead, the library is only losing an average of 20 items monthly. At \$22 an item, this equates to approximately \$440 in lost materials per month. Therefore, it appears that the library's effort to protect the collection is saving \$31,680 annually. Nationally, an average library loses about 3 percent of its inventory each year. The Norfolk Public Library loses about .37 percent of its inventory.

"Many libraries use a collection agency to get back their materials. That can be expensive. Our system which involves prosecution is effective. Our main objective is to get the materials back to the library," Caldararo said.