Action Item 2: Remove Forgive Option

# Proposal :

Proposal submitted by Kathy Griffis, Director of the Coastal Plain Regional Library System:

"I would like for the subcommittee to consider completely dropping the FORGIVE option on the patron Bills screen."

Explanation:

"It really cause a lot of trouble with a library system that uses a collection agency. To a collection agency it means/equals cash and we have to pay the amount that is forgiven. I have drummed it into the CPRL staff to NEVER—EVER use it again, so when it pops up, it is a red flag and someone out there in PINES land has forgiven one of our patrons debts. I have been known to contact the library whose staff had performed the action to get our money back. I think it is partly in the training of the circ staff that this occurs. PINES Policy on page 33 has a section on Collection/Materials Recovery Agencies. The patron who has been sent to collections should contact the library where the fines/fees were created. That is also found in the policy under Paying Fines/Fees (pg.31). If they want to pay somewhere else, the price of the book, processing or fines and fee should be all sent to the library who has the patron in collection status. If an item should truly be forgiven, because the item was found on our shelves or some other valid reason, we can use GOODS or WORK. They do not affect our bill to Unique. Thank you for at least considering this."

# Survey Results:

The following summary is based on survey results from 43 PINES Subcommittees and Directors representing 31 library systems. Some additional comments were emailed after voting took place and added to the comments below.

**Responses from Subcommittee Members:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Should the "Forgive" option be eliminated from the patron Bills screen? | **Responses** | **Percentage** |
| Yes | 5 | 20% |
| No | 18 | 72% |
| Undecided | 2 | 8% |

**Responses from Directors who are not Subcommittee Members:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Should the "Forgive" option be eliminated from the patron Bills screen? | **Responses** | **Percentage** |
| Yes | 4 | 22% |
| No | 12 | 67% |
| Undecided | 2 | 11% |

# Comments:

**Comments From People Against the Change:**

* A needed option.
* Absolutely not. Systems NOT using a collection agency use this feature. This is a training issue, not a system issue.
* I can understand the reason behind the request. However, I do not like the thought of using GOODS as a substitution. We use the goods feature during food for fines. I believe the terminology should reflect what in reality has happened. When we find the item on the shelf, the fines are forgiven. When checking out to a patron, Evergreen will even recommend forgiving if the item is still checked out to another patron. Is it possible for the affected libraries to work with the collection agency so Forgive has the same meaning as Goods?
* I don’t like this. If the problem is with the collecting agency, then they need to ensure that the company does interpret forgive as money. We use goods when we use food for fines. I don’t like the idea of using terminology incorrectly.
* I feel that many small rural county systems need this when an individual has special circumstances. This is used when there is a death, sickness, and etc. Otherwise we do not use the forgive, but within the pines system each system has different Patron types and needs and this would be why we need several different functions to manage our on Patron's needs.
* I like having the Forgive option for dealing with a Griffin fine on the fly when there is a patron/customer service issue. I don’t think I would use Forgive on a fine for another library, and I know I would not on a charge that has been sent to collections. I would leave the option in place.
* I think "forgive" serves a useful function to many library systems and should remain. If it is possible to change "forgive" to a local option, then I think that would be fine.
* I understand the concern that Mrs. Griffis has on this matter, however I believe she has hit on the problem; training. I have worked now at two different library systems and they both have the same policy; if the patron is in collections they have two options. (1) Pay the bill owed along with any fees as long as they are YOUR patron, (2) Contact the director about the situation for a resolution, which still may be paying the bill. However if they are a patron of another system they MUST go to, or contact, the system that they are in collections at to resolve the problem. To take away the forgive option, in my opinion, would be taking away a valid function of the system. As Mrs. Griffis points out, there are times items are missed and shelved without being checked in; mistakes happen to us all. At times like that it would be prudent to use the FORGIVE feature in PINES. Therefore I would recommend that we leave the FORGIVE feature in the system for now.
* Just limit to manager., assist. or director and not give permission to everyone working circ.
* My main reason for "no" is because not all libraries use a collection agency, and many staff do regularly use forgive vs. goods/work. However, if EG would let you turn on/of this option locally, that would be ok.
* My staff does not make those kinds of decisions.  We usually direct the patron back to the library where those balances have accrued for clarification or action.
* No. Instead, branch managers should be training staff NOT to forgive fines when an account is marked for collections.
* Our library system uses this to track occasions when we err on the side of customer service and actually forgive an existing bill or portion of an existing bill. Calling it "Forgive" makes its use apparent -- the library decided it was worthwhile to reduce the amount without any goods or services exchanging hands. "Forgive" is never utilized by front-line staff as it is not a method of payment; it is only utilized by supervisors. (We do run reports to periodically check on this -- which most libraries should do to compare their daily cash receipts in Evergreen with their cash on hand). If the issue is one of another library system forgiving bills that have been collections reported, there is a simple solution. Whenever we report an account to Unique, we mark the account "Barred". This further locks the account (from the patron point of view) and prevents staff at any other PINES library from un-barring the account; even if payment is received and/or bills are forgiven, the account remains blocked from use. This is useful whether the bills are forgiven or actually paid; we will not un-bar a patron's account until we receive physical payment. We have made an exception to this rule once, as a learning moment for the staff involved, but will maintain this procedure as long as we are able. Removing "'forgive" is not an option for our library system; the idea to use "Goods" or "Work" to mean "Forgive" presents a situation where we have decided that staff are un-trainable (because we cannot train them in the proper use of "Forgive") yet we expect to train them to use another function when they want to track the library reducing a bill amount. Not only would that scenario fail to resolve the core issue, it would present a case for shuffling local responsibility for staffing onto the PINES consortium. \*\* Our front line staff have erroneously accepted payment on a credit-reported account. However complicated this makes the paper trail for collections, we are able to add the bills back to the account and return the payment to the patron -- with an explanation that "unfortunately, we are unable to accept payment because the account has been reported to a collections agency and payment must be made at the responsible library." (While they might be ruffled to hear it, it does not make our saying it any less important. Do we stop enforcing "walking feet" in the youth areas just because they want to run, run, run?)
* Really?
* Sometimes we actually have to forgive a fine! Sometimes there are errors (either system or human) and sometimes there are compelling mitigating circumstances. If FORGIVE is eliminated, we would need something else to cover these situations - like CORRECTION or WAIVE.
* The billing payment options are not an issue. This policy proposal brings up some good questions about handling billing payments and training. Libraries are responsible for training staff on how to properly mark payments. The 'Forgive' payment option has been wonderful for running amnesty months that apply only to the owning library's items and accounts not turned over to collections. When Evergreen does not acknowledge a one-day grace period then a 'void payment' would be more appropriate whereas during amnesty a patron is responsible for the fines but is being forgiven partial payment (only on the items belonging to the library system participating in the amnesty & only those items/accounts that have not been turned over to collections). With much consideration the 'Forgive' option should NOT be eliminated from the patron Bills screen.
* Those wishing to use something different have alot of options. Those of us who use this feature all the time would like to continue to have "Forgive" as an option.
* Train staff to follow set procedure instead.
* We also use Unique, but based on our County's auditing procedures, we would still need to be able to use Forgive for those times its needed, and our County's Auditing department doesn't alow for us to use Goods or Work as a way to pay for fines and fees. To use Goods or Work as reasons, even if our patron didn't truly do that, shows up on the daily Cash Report form from Evergreen that we submit to Finance/Audit and would create problems for us.
* We direct the patron to contact the library where their issue lies.
* We need this option locally.

**Comments From People In Favor of the Change:**

* There are other options that can be used and "Forgive" causes problems for those systems using a collection agency.

**Comments from People Undecided on the Change:**

* I can see the problem as it relates to using a collection agency. However for those of us that do not, sometimes that forgive button comes in handy. You can indeed use the void all fines option under the individual item details, but because forgive works for the entire bill, it is sometimes more appropriate. Only the Director and Asst. Dir. can use this option, and our staff knows about that. If we use GOODS or WORK options, then we would be using those options for something they weren't intended for. If it goes away we would likely just put it down as paid (even though it wasn't) and that misaligns the billing data in PINES with our receipts (not that it ever does match but we would like it to and this just encourages further discrepancies).
* I don't see the need to remove it. We use it. It sounds more like a staff training opportunity rather than a policy change. I would need a good alternative to it to agree with this. I don't like using GOODS or WORK unless we have received goods or works for the bill.
* I have very mixed feelings about this. I think that this needs to be addressed with the collection agency. I agree with Kathy that it is a staff training issue but I would prefer not to have to choose goods or work when I actually am forgiving a patron's fine. If the item is found on the shelf, we usually void the bill. Perhaps, patrons who are sent to collection agencies should be barred and then one hopes that staff would realize that the barring library needs to be contacted before any action is taken on the record. I will also note that we do not use a collection agency at Brooks County so I have not had the experience of being charged when another system forgave my patron in collection agency status. However, we have had instances where our lost items were just written off or ignored by another PINES library and the patron has been issued a new card. It all goes back to training.
* Staff training is very important when dealing with items that do not belong to your library system or when dealing with items associated with collection agencies as mentioned here. We are not opposed to making changes to not have fines appear as payments. I like the term “waive” of fines. We sometimes forgive fines that are 10 years or older (items belonging to our library system, and items not associated with other libraries' collection agencies). We don't use "void" in these cases because the fines were owed to begin with and not a mistake on the account. As long as we are able to forgive or waive fines we deem necessary as mentioned above, and they not show up as payments, we are in agreement with the proposal.