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TSCPL Fee-Based Obituary Request System Analysis

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## TSCPL Fee-Based Obituary Request System Analysis

### **Introduction**

Currently at the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library (TSCPL), card-carrying library patrons can conduct their own searches by the newspaper databases TSCPL provides, and by performing microfilm research. Visitors from other cities within Kansas, and other states, must contact adult services librarians by email, which is then normally delivered to Greg Romer, the *de facto* genealogy librarian at TSCPL. Many individuals will email their requests for obituaries even though they do not have a membership to the library. Because of this practice, TSCPL would like to have a fee-based obituary request system policy in place to create revenue for the library, and to ensure compensation for the time of the librarian. This analysis seeks to establish a system for TSCPL while examining policies and procedures of other public libraries across the country.

### **Pre-Payment**

At the present time, TSCPL provides copies of the requested obituaries at no cost, up to ten obituaries per each request. In the current economy, TSCPL is in search for ways to add revenue for the budget. Since printing and copying obituaries takes a large amount of time and effort of the librarian, and the printing and copying also uses supplies, charging for obituaries is one idea to fill the additional revenue need. Many of the public libraries researched required the fee delivered up front, before the librarian completed the transaction by supplying the obituaries to the patron.

One example of this pre-pay system is the [Madison Public Library](#). When clicking on the highlighted link, their Madison Area Obituaries page explains they would like individuals outside of the public library system searching for obituaries to pay in advance by sending their

requests via mail and including a check for payment. This also allows the library to have a hard copy of the request, to enable more than one librarian to work on filling the order. The [Tacoma Public Library](#) has the same policy and system for payment collection, as do many others. Pre-paying implies the individual is serious about receiving the information, by being willing to pay for the services of the librarian.

### **Online Forms**

An interesting idea for TSCPL is to incorporate the patron's involvement in the obituary request process by having them fill out an online form. A portable document format (pdf), or a Microsoft Office document, would be printed, filled out, and mailed with the correct fee, all by the individual requesting the obituaries. An example of this form is from the [Pacific Library Partnership](#), a consortium of libraries in California, which was obtained by clicking on the form link within their website. This policy change would put the responsibility on the patron rather than librarian. By not accepting email orders, the fee would have to be delivered along with the request, while providing the correct information, eliminating the guesswork for the librarian.

However, the same library system, Pacific Library Partnership, has an online form to fill out, in which the individual fills out the required information, and also pre-pays, using either a Mastercard or Visa through [Pay-Pal](#), which is a e-business that allows payment to be made through the internet. This method is obviously the fastest, rather than going through the mail, and still allows for pre-payment. However, TSCPL would have to set up a Pay-Pal account for this method, if it does not already have one in place for other items of library business.

### **Amount per Order**

Many libraries researched for this analysis considered one obituary request as an order, with that being in only one newspaper. An example of this policy is found at the [Santa Clara](#)

[County Library](#), which is also part of the Pacific Library Partnership. This library limits their requests to one name per newspaper as an order, which also cuts the work of the librarian. Currently, TSCPL allows up to ten requests per each order, with no fee attached, which is generous in light of the research obtained of other public libraries.

However, Santa Clara County Library's example of the lowest number of requests possible per order is in direct opposition to [Newport News Public Library System](#), which also has a [form](#) that allows up to six requests to be researched. Some libraries are also requiring a large flat fee, with no restrictions on the amount per order, such as [Waupaca Area Public Library](#), who charge \$15.00 as a pre-payment for service rendered, whether they find the information, or not. TSCPL will have to decide the appropriate number of obituaries they will allow per one order, possibly allowing for ten requests still, but charging a larger fee. Conversely, charging a lower fee, and having a lower amount of requests per order is another option to consider.

### **Non-refundable fee**

One idea for added revenue concerning obituaries is already being instituted in many public libraries for inter-library loans (ILLs). Some libraries are charging a small non-refundable fee for ILLs, in the event the patron might change their mind about wanting the ILL, and for the cost of mailing. If TSCPL was to charge a non-refundable fee regardless of the amount of obituary names requested, it would add revenue for TSCPL to compensate the library for the time of the librarian. This fee would also make the individuals who take advantage of the currently free obituary service hesitate to send in so many requests.

The [City of Glendale, CA Library](#) had this incorporated into their policy by ensuring the non-refundable fee is strictly for the search, even if no obituary is found for the patron. Searching

through microfilm and printing does take time to complete, and a non-refundable fee is an option for TSCPL to consider, in conjunction with the charge per order, or as the Waupaca Area Public Library did, just as a flat fee.

### **Billable Researchers**

To establish a system for fee-based requests, TSCPL will need to determine who will be charged for the obituary services. Most libraries researched provided the use of microfilm and genealogy databases for free to card-carrying library patrons. It seems that most individuals that have a library card often come in to browse and complete their own research, especially those interested in genealogy. Therefore, the fee for obituary requests should be focused mainly on individuals outside of the library area, including the rest of Kansas and out-of-state residents.

However, there is the option of charging a handling fee for library cardholders who choose not to do the research in the library, and still request items to be sent to them via mail, or email. An example of this would be charging the cost of copying or printing using the standard fee that is paid by patrons using the services in the library, and postage for mailing. This would still generate revenue for the TSCPL, but not necessarily turn away the library patrons.

Out-of-state residents and even some Kansas residents outside of the TSCPL area would obviously not be able to utilize the actual library for obituary searching, therefore relying upon the librarian to print and search for the records. Charging these individuals for obituary retrieval would once again discern who was taking advantage of TSCPL's currently free system.

### **Cost for Services**

In these times of economic hardship, TSCPL does need ways to increase revenue. Charging for obituary searches is one way to do that. In researching libraries for this project, it seems the libraries that do not charge for this service are typically smaller libraries. Topeka

would not be considered a city with a large population, but it is one of the larger cities in Kansas, with a sizable genealogy collection. Because of this collection, it would seem that TSCPL is providing the area with valuable information and as Davidsson (2004) states, "Assisting this library user group in the specialized area of genealogy research raises unique issues and challenges for librarians" (p. 142). This statement is indicative of the dilemma TSCPL will face deciding on a policy for this area.

Costs of services ranged drastically from library to library, seemingly dependent on the size of the library service area. Several of the previously mentioned libraries are within large cities, which tended to have higher fees. The Pacific Library Partnership, which is located in California, requires a \$20.00 pre-payment per name, per newspaper. The Waupaca Area Public Library, located in Wisconsin, offers a flat fee of \$15.00, as mentioned above. These seem to be a large enough payment requirement to dissuade some individuals from requesting obituaries, especially here in the Midwest where the cost of living is somewhat lower. If this was to be the outcome, it does seem to be defeating the purpose of a public library, which is providing access to all information.

Other libraries had lower costs. Tacoma Public Library requires a \$5.00 fee per request, and the [Wilmington Public Library](#) also required a \$5.00 fee, which included three requests per cost. Even lower costs of \$1.00 per request, with a limit of five names per request, were offered at [Parkersburg & Wood County Public Library](#). These costs seem to be more in accordance with the income level of Shawnee County residents, but since these costs would apply to out-of-state and other residents of Kansas, the librarians establishing the policies will have to decide what would benefit the library the most. Some individuals will not want to pay high prices and will not utilize the library, thus not paying any money to TSCPL.

**Conclusion**

To establish a fee-based obituary request system, TSCPL will need to examine what they want out of the system, how they will use the system, and how the public will respond to such a system. The research of other libraries has shown there are public libraries across the country that have adopted some version of request systems that are fee-based. Pre-payment versions, either using forms mailed in by the researcher, or using online forms with an online payment option were the most popular. Some incorporated a non-refundable fee for the time of the librarian, supplies and postage. There were many different versions of the amount per order, and who would be billed. The cost for services was also widely varied. These are items TSCPL will decide upon when establishing the system, but fortunately, many libraries around the country can provide a good example of the steps to take.

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