

June 30, 2020

Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Culture & Heritage Sector COVID-19 Impact Hearings

Written Submission

Submitted by:

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About FOPL:

The Federation of Ontario Public Libraries represents Ontario's over 400 public library systems exceeding 1,000 branches in virtually every Ontario community. FOPL works with the membership on strengthening Ontario's public libraries through advocacy, research & development, and marketing.

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About OLA:

OLA is a professional association that includes 5,000 members who work in or with public, school, academic, health and special libraries. OLA members create networking and professional development opportunities designed to strengthen the library sector and to ultimately provide impactful and meaningful library services for Ontarians.

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The Ontario Library Association and the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries is providing this written submission in addition to the presentation made to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs on June 25th 2020.

On March 17, 2020 Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health required closure of all Public Libraries. Subsequently, it was directed that commencing May 19, 2020, Public Libraries could begin to offer pick-up and delivery of library materials.

While local public libraries physically closed during the lockdown, they nevertheless stepped up and continued to deliver many services and supports to their communities.

Local public libraries across the province have been:

- Providing Wi-Fi connectivity for residents and essential municipal staff via hotspots lending, in parking lots or through bookmobiles.
- Lending laptops/PCs and peripherals to municipal and essential staff to continue working from home.
- Providing access to e-resources such as e-books, free streaming platforms, reference materials and more.
- Moving programming online to help families and individuals, delivering virtual story time, tech training programs, book clubs, and more.
- Registering non-library cardholders online.
- Organizing “care calls” to vulnerable community members, including seniors.
- Delivering reading materials to senior’s homes, essential worker daycares, and more.



∴ ontario library association

- Taking part in the COVID-19 emergency response by using 3D Printers to make PPE for frontline workers (approximately 1,000 printers across the province) and turning library branches into emergency food banks.
- Acting as a trusted source of information regarding COVID-19, amplifying public health messaging and sharing current, local information regarding the pandemic.

Public libraries are now taking careful steps to re-open, while keeping patrons and staff safe.

COVID-19 has put a magnifying glass on the critical role of local public libraries and the challenges they will face over the coming months and years. These challenges are especially acute for public libraries in small and medium-sized communities, in rural & Northern Ontario, and First Nations. For them, the public library is a vital, and often the only, cost-free, stigma-free community hub for residents and families.

Proposed Actions:

There are important actions that the Ontario Government can take to ensure that local public libraries everywhere in Ontario can continue to effectively serve their communities.

We're proposing **three critical, targeted actions** to support Ontario's public libraries:

1. Ensure that municipalities have the funding necessary to protect front-line service delivery.

Municipalities across Ontario are struggling with growing revenue shortfalls as a result of the pandemic. This is an immediate concern to public libraries, as approximately 96% of their funding comes from the local municipality. As municipal revenues are impacted, libraries are already under fiscal pressure.

As of late April, 46% of libraries surveyed reported that they have already implemented partial or full staff layoffs. This loss of revenue is happening at a time when usage and dependence on the public library is increasing: Library usage traditionally spikes during recessions and libraries have reported an increase demand for resources during this time. If unaddressed, this will force deep cuts to local public libraries, and even permanent closures in many smaller communities.

We strongly urge the Ontario government to work closely with municipalities to address this growing funding gap. Implementing a supportive funding framework for municipalities quickly is essential for protecting Ontario's public libraries and the substantial support they provide for local economic development, community supports, access to children's programming and government services.

2. Leverage Ontario's broadband action plan to ensure that modern broadband connectivity is available in more public library branches in communities across Ontario.

COVID-19 has demonstrated that Ontarians in all communities depend on digital access – to work, to learn, to connect to community and government services, to find or train for a job, and to access health information. However, many communities in Ontario have limited or poor residential broadband service.

Even with the physical doors closed, the demand for public library broadband increased during the lockdown period. Libraries have reported a steady stream of people parked or seated outside the library to use the Wi-Fi. These are people working remotely, applying for government relief, and participating in remote learning for K-12 or university & college.

It is not anticipated that the need for broadband access will fall, and we must build the infrastructure our libraries need now. Many branches still don't have broadband access or have outdated internet infrastructure that doesn't meet today's needs. Investing in public library broadband infrastructure provides an opportunity to rapidly extend this critical connectivity to more people. Ontarians require broadband access in their communities to take part in an increasingly digital economy and society.

3. Provide critical e-learning support through fair access to modern, digital resources for the people of Ontario – no matter where they live – by creating an Ontario Digital Public Library.

Public libraries are focused on meeting the needs of their community. Increasingly, this means providing digital and online resources. These not only contribute to student success and life-long learning, but also to entrepreneurship and job readiness. However, these are expensive, especially when purchased on a patchwork, library-by-library basis.

Many public libraries in Ontario struggle to pay for or are unable to afford the high-quality resources available in larger urban and suburban communities. People living in Ontario communities of less than 5,000 people have access to less than half the selection of e-books and a third of the online databases available to residents in Toronto, Ottawa, and Hamilton. However, those living in rural areas accessed twice as many e-books per capita through the library as people in urban communities.

Over 80% of libraries serving populations of under 5,000 have no subscriptions to e-learning platforms at all. These resources are invaluable for job training and re-training, lifelong learning and homework help.

Creating an Ontario Digital Public Library through a targeted provincial investment would leverage the province's significant purchasing power to give all Ontarians access to a common set of e-learning and online resources through their public library – at home or in the library. People living in small, rural, Northern communities and First Nations would be able to access the same wide range of digital resources as in big city libraries.

In addition, as public libraries are consistently ranked within the top three public services, we encourage the provincial government to promote public libraries as a key resource to Ontarians during this time.

In conclusion:

Taken together, we believe that these three steps are critical to providing all public libraries in Ontario with a stable foundation upon which to continue adapting to the realities of COVID-19.

Furthermore, they'll directly contribute to achieving the Ontario Government's vision of a province where every community is open for business, where a student has the tools to succeed wherever they grow up, where employment and economic and social infrastructure

is fairly and equitably available, and where seniors and families can thrive in every community.

We look forward to continue to work together to maintain robust, locally impactful public libraries throughout Ontario.

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