

Getting Ontario Up to Speed: Delivering Better Broadband through Ontario's Rural & Northern Public Libraries

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*The Ontario Library Association and the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries
are providing this written submission in addition to the presentation made to
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The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how much Ontarians in all communities rely on high-speed 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.

Unfortunately, many Ontario communities are still unable to access the modern broadband internet services that are taken for granted in urban and suburban centres. Without it, Ontarians living in these communities face real challenges as “second-class” digital citizens.ⁱ

Ontario's Public Libraries are an essential access-point for equitable, reliable access to broadband internet and computers. This is especially vital for many rural and Northern communities across Ontario where at-home connectivity is limited, and for hundreds of thousands of Ontarians that cannot afford in-home internet services. Without public libraries to depend on, many rural and Northern Ontarians have limited options for accessing technology and broadband internet.ⁱⁱⁱ

MODERN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Public libraries are always evolving to meet the changing needs of communities. For example, public libraries in large and small communities:

- Provide access to digital resources and e-books in-branch and from the comfort of home, allowing community members to access when and where it suits them;
- Have maker spaces, coding labs and other next generation experiential learning to help children and adults alike develop modern job skills;
- Work with local economic development, employment and social services agencies to assist community members in upgrading their skills and finding a job;
- Partner with ServiceOntario to provide local access through hundreds of public libraries, saving people time and helping them complete these important transactions much closer to home.

The ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has and will continue to underscore how much many Ontarians depend on public libraries for essential internet access. However, many libraries are facing critical limitations. Some rural and Northern branches are still not connected to broadband internet, and many others are limited to outdated services (ADSL, Satellite) that does not meet the needs of Ontarians studying, working and learning remotely. There is an urgent need to improve broadband capacity at these libraries to ensure that no Ontario communities are left behind.

Up to Speed: Ontario's Broadband and Cellular Action Plan recognizes that public libraries in rural, remote and First Nations are struggling to provide access to digital resources. Furthermore, it sets out how modernizing access to broadband and its capabilities is critical to delivering on several of the government's priorities, including:

- Making Ontario open for business by attracting and stimulating new economic activity & investment
- Enhancing access to government services
- Supporting expanded online learning for Ontario students
- Improving quality-of-life for all Ontarians

There is an opportunity to leverage the existing role and capabilities of Ontario's public libraries to achieve the Ontario Government's bold plan to expand broadband access to all Ontarians. A targeted investment to modernize and connect rural and Northern public libraries to up-to-date broadband services will build upon their existing role as technology hubs in these communities and ensure that nearly all Ontarians will have access to broadband where they live.



PUBLIC LIBRARIES HELP ONTARIO STUDENTS LEARN REMOTELY

Gabriel – Haliburton, Ontario

"I am in the Bachelor of Music program at Western University, and I have been using the Wi-Fi a few times a week for an average of about an hour and a half for each session since the university closed.

I have needed it for conference calls using the program Zoom for my lectures...I have been incredibly grateful for the use because, in the part of the Minden/Carnarvon area in which my family lives, the internet is too slow to do what would be necessary to complete classwork and lectures."ⁱⁱ

Public Libraries and the COVID-19 Pandemic

On March 17, 2020, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health required the closure of all Public Libraries. While local public libraries were physically closed for several months, they nevertheless stepped up and continued to deliver critical services and supports to their communities. In the past several months, as Ontario communities and services have re-opened, libraries have taken careful steps to open their physical doors and offer a wide range of resources and services in a safe, effective manner.

Throughout the pandemic, local public libraries across the province have been:

- Re-opening in branch services according to strict measures to protect health & safety in accordance with public healthy

PUBLIC LIBRARIES ARE TECHNOLOGY HUBS

Public libraries are increasingly focused on meeting the needs of their community for digital and online resources and services that can be accessed through the library or at home. Digital adoption by public libraries is happening at an incredible pace:

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authority requirements.

- 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.
- 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 and local information regarding the pandemic.

The Case for a Digital Investment in Public Libraries

The COVID-19 emergency has magnified the weaknesses and opportunities in the role of public libraries in every Ontario community.

At Ontario public libraries, digital services are highly in-demand. However, in many libraries access to these services is limited by the **availability** of broadband and online resources. Many branches still do not have high-speed broadband access or have outdated internet infrastructure that does not meet today’s needs and the demand for digital access across Ontario communities. Without modern broadband access through the public library, many rural and Northern Ontario residents will be left behind with social distancing measures still in place for schools, colleges & universities, apprenticeships and workplaces.

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- Since 2000, Ontarians have accessed their local public library digitally 1.3 billion times.ⁱⁱⁱ
- In 2018, 284,000 Ontarians enrolled in over 700,000 online courses through local public libraries across Ontario.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Ontarians borrowed 494,026 e-books from local public libraries in 2018. **Rural Ontario residents accessed twice as many e-books** per capita through the library as people in urban communities.ⁱⁱⁱ



PUBLIC LIBRARIES HELP PEOPLE TRAIN FOR NEW JOBS

Michael – Bonfield, Ontario

When Michael was laid off from his job, he set out in search of a new career.

Needing help to get started, he came to the Bonfield Public Library to access computer tutoring and skills training to upgrade his employment qualifications.

Through the public library, Michael was able to complete required pipeline construction safety training courses that were key for him to secure a great new career in Northern Ontario.

There are a number of factors that can impact a library's ability to provide the online access that the community needs. These include:

- Limited broadband or slow, outdated services like ADSL and Satellite.
- Outdated technology infrastructure, such as computers and routers.
- Network load, with staff and public workstations sharing the same slow connections.

The Value of Technology Access in Public Libraries

A recent studyⁱⁱ involving 50 urban, rural, First Nation and Francophone Libraries, demonstrates the impact of technology access in public libraries on local communities' digital capacity and employment readiness. Of people using technology in their public library:

- **53%** reported that the public library was the only access point for the technology they used.
- **59%** engaged in educational activities and skills upgrading, especially younger patrons, immigrants and visible minorities.
- **34%** developed employable skills, and of those, **62%** reported that this was important to helping them successfully find a job.
- **33%** of people accessed government services or resources online. People 55 and older and low-income groups were more likely to use these services.

Recommendations: Delivering Better Broadband and Digital Resources Through Ontario's Public Libraries

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

Public libraries are Ontario's farthest-reaching, most cost-effective, reaching 98% of Ontarians in hundreds of Ontario communities of all sizes. Public libraries are local, close to home, and adapt to the priorities of the people and communities they serve. For many Ontarians, public libraries are their best and only access to reliable internet services. 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.

Many branches still do not have high-speed broadband access or have outdated internet infrastructure that does not meet today's needs. Without it, many rural and Northern Ontario residents won't have the critical access they need to study and work in the

MAKING A LOCAL IMPACT

For residents of **Callander**, located on Lake Nipissing, the nearest standalone ServiceOntario branch is 30km away in North Bay. Since many members of the community don't have fast or reliable internet in their homes or even regular access to a car, **they rely on their local public library to access ServiceOntario.**

Through the Ontario Government's ServiceOntario at the Libraries initiative, **Callander Public Library** staff assist and guide people who need help completing their ServiceOntario transactions, helping both the people and the province **save time and money.**

critical months ahead.

We must build the infrastructure our libraries need now. Provincial investment in public library broadband infrastructure is needed to fill the gap and rapidly extend this connectivity to more people, from students & job-seekers to seniors. Ontarians require broadband access in their communities to take part and advance in an increasingly digital economy and society. These investments have the distinct advantage of building upon the well-established role that public libraries play as local technology access points, modernizing broadband access to ensure that people living in rural and Northern communities have the same opportunities to study, train, work and learn as all Ontarians.

2. 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 towards 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.^{iv}

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.^v

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.

Moving Forward Together

Taken together, we believe that these recommendations are critical to rapidly deliver Ontario's goal of expanding broadband internet access throughout the province. They will also provide all communities in Ontario, through their public library, with a stable foundation upon which to continue adapting to the long-term needs of Ontarians in the COVID-19 ongoing emergency and far beyond.

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 continuing to work together to maintain robust, locally impactful public libraries throughout Ontario.

About the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries:

The Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL) represents Ontario's 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.

About the Ontario Library Association:

The Ontario Library Association (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.

ⁱThe Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA). (2020) [Survey on internet use during COVID-19](#), 2020

ⁱⁱ Sullivan, B and Kernohan-Berning, E. (2020) [The wrong side of the digital divide](#). Open-Shelf (May 31, 2020)

ⁱⁱⁱNordicity. (2018) [Technology Access in Public Libraries: Outcomes and Impacts for Ontario Communities](#). Toronto Public Library.

^{iv}Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries. (2018). [Ontario Public Library Statistics](#)

^vFederation of Ontario Public Libraries (2019) [Ontario Public Library Operating Data 2009-2018: Overview, Primer on Library Statistics, and Collected Tables](#). Compiled by: Molyneux, R, & Abram,S.

Appendix: Additional Research Links

How libraries play a vital role in restoring the economy

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/industry-news/property-report/article-virtual-and-physical-community-living-room-of-a-library-a-much/>

Selected Economic ROI - Return on Investment - Current Studies for Canadian Public Libraries

<http://fopl.ca/news/selected-economic-roi-return-on-investment-current-studies-for-canadian-public-libraries/>

Valuing Northern Public Libraries Summary Report

<http://fopl.ca/news/valuing-northern-libraries-summary-report/>

Important Ontario Public Library Social ROI Reports

<http://fopl.ca/news/important-ontario-social-roi-reports/>

IFLA: Library Return on Investment: Reviewing the Evidence from the Last 10 Years

<http://fopl.ca/news/ifla-library-return-on-investment-reviewing-the-evidence-from-the-last-10-years/>

Toronto Public Library Study released: So Much More: The Economic Impact of the Toronto Public Library System on the City of Toronto

<http://fopl.ca/news/toronto-public-library-study-released/>

Hill Times Article: The Future of My Community Depends on Broadband

<https://www.hilltimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/strongnetworks-scaled.jpg>

Ontario Public Libraries attracted 100% More program attendees from 2000-2018! AND doubled per capita attendance too.

<http://fopl.ca/news/ontario-public-libraries-attracted-100-more-program-attendees-from-2000-2018-and-doubled-per-capita-attendance-too/>