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Federation of ONTARIO PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Supporting Ontario's Public Libraries to Empower Local Economic Growth

OLA & FOPL Advocacy Priorities
September 2023

Public libraries are critical to communities across Ontario and essential to thriving local economies and economic growth.

- Public libraries are Ontario's farthest-reaching, most cost-effective public resource. They are engines of innovation, entrepreneurship, and local economic development in communities of all sizes.
- Millions of Ontarians rely on local public libraries in their communities: to work, to learn, to connect to community and government services, and to find or train for a job.
- Despite this, many individuals and families across the province are unable to access the local public library resources they need.
- In urban centres, rural and Northern communities alike, public library budgets are overstretched – and the situation is getting worse.
- The combined impact of the pandemic, the pressure of inflation on public library and municipal budgets, and growing social and economic challenges in communities across the province have brought public libraries to a critical point.
- The situation for public libraries located on First Nations Reserves in Ontario is even more challenging, as these libraries do not receive funding from municipal taxes. This has overburdened a funding model that has left many public libraries on reserve closed or with severely reduced access.

Investing in public libraries will directly support people, their communities and local economy.

Through carefully targeted investments, the Ontario Government can ensure that all Ontarians – no matter where they live or learn – will continue to have access to modern, cost-effective resources and services they have come to rely on through their local public libraries.

- Provide critical e-learning support and fair access to modern, digital resources for all Ontario public libraries through the creation of an Ontario Digital Public Library, leveraging the province's significant purchasing power to give all Ontarians access to a common core of high quality e-learning & online resources.
- Working alongside First Nations Public Library leaders, rapidly implement a sustainable funding model for public libraries on reserve to ensure that these important local hubs are fully-funded and

viable. This includes enhancing the existing direct provincial funding support for public libraries on reserve to sustainably fund library operations and ensure a living income for frontline library staff in these communities.

- Increase provincial operating funding for Ontario's public libraries through a targeted investment in shared community and provincial priorities, and work with municipalities to ensure that this strategic investment builds upon and enhances existing municipal support for public library budgets.

Priorities

Provide critical e-learning support and fair access to modern, digital resources for all Ontario public libraries through the creation of an Ontario Digital Public Library, leveraging the province's significant purchasing power to give all Ontarians access to a common core of high-quality e-learning & online resources.

- Ontario's Public Libraries are essential to equitable, reliable access to broadband internet and computers. They are especially vital for many First Nation, rural and Northern communities where at home connectivity is limited, and for hundreds of thousands of Ontarians that cannot afford in-home internet services.
- The Ontario Government has recognized the crucial importance of public libraries to broadband internet access, making a $4.8 million investment to install or upgrade broadband connectivity at over 100 public libraries across the province.
- In particular, people rely on local public libraries for access to digital and online resources, which contribute to student success and life-long learning, as well as towards entrepreneurship and job readiness.
- However, these resources are expensive, especially when purchased on a patchwork, library-by-library basis.
- Many public libraries in Ontario, particularly in smaller and First Nation communities, struggle to pay for or are unable to afford these high-quality resources.
- People living in communities of less than 5,000 have access to less than a third of the online resources as those living in Toronto – despite accessing them twice as often per capita as people in large urban communities.
- Addressing this digital divide – through both broadband connectivity and the high-impact resources to match – is how public libraries are at the forefront of fulfilling Ontario's vision of an economy where every individual and community and contribute and compete.
- Creating an Ontario Digital Public Library through a targeted provincial investment would leverage the province's significant purchasing power to give all Ontarians – no matter where they live – access to a common set of high-quality digital resources through their public library.
- Ontario's public library sector would work closely the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport and agency partners on the development and implementation of an Ontario Digital Public Library to ensure the included resources are appropriate to the needs of public libraries and communities of all sizes, that barriers to access are addressed, and that integration with existing digital infrastructure at the individual library level is seamless.
- *Projected cost:* $10 million - $20 million / annually.

Working alongside First Nations Public Library leaders, implement a sustainable funding model for public libraries on reserve to ensure that these important local hubs are fully-funded and viable.

As an immediate first step, enhance the existing direct provincial funding support for public libraries on reserve to sustainably fund library operations and ensure a living income for frontline library staff in these communities.

- Public libraries on reserve serve as an accessible gathering place and information sharing resource for First Nations communities. They are deeply important to maintaining a sense of community and to minimizing social isolation in these communities, many of which are remote or face systemic social and economic challenges.
- Furthermore, public libraries on reserve perform a unique role in the preservation of their communities' memory, archiving community photos and historical information, and in revitalizing First Nations languages through cultural resources, language learning programming, storytelling events, and craft groups.
- Public libraries on reserve are chronically under-funded. The municipal tax revenue used to support most public libraries does not exist for public libraries in First Nation communities. Provincial funding through the Public Library Operating Grant (PLOG) and the First Nation Salary Supplement Grant (FNSS) provides on average $15,000/year to each of the existing public libraries on reserve. Band Councils must therefore allocate essential funding support such as rent, hydro, internet, fax and telephone services.
- There is little to no funding available for collections, programming and technology resources.
- Librarians rely on one-time grants or donations to develop their collections, and many librarians contribute personally to purchase programming supplies and food.
- Many public libraries on reserve operate with only one staff person who is expected to perform many functions – librarian, archivist, community liaison, fundraiser, administrator, tech support, and more. Public libraries on reserve need additional funding to provide staff with a living wage and to increase staffing levels so that they can meet their communities' needs for library programs and services.
- Of the 133 First Nations communities in Ontario, only 39 have public libraries. The number has steadily dropped in recent years and the pandemic has only made this situation worse, with four public libraries on reserve closing their doors due to inadequate funding over the past 20 months.

Recommended Priority:

- As an immediate first step, the First Nations Salary Supplement must be increased to ensure that all existing staff of public libraries on reserve are fairly compensated for the work they perform.
- *Projected cost:* $2 million / annually (First Nation Salary Supplement increase for existing public libraries on reserve).

Increase provincial funding for Ontario's public libraries to address critical shared priorities and community needs.

- Public libraries in Ontario have received no increase in provincial funding support (Provincial Libraries Operating Grant, or PLOG) in over 25 years, during which time the value of the province's investment in public libraries has decreased by over 60%.
- Although over 90% of public library funding is provided by the local municipal government,

provincial operating funding provides critical stability to public library budgets.

- Libraries have adapted and maximized the impact of every dollar despite inflation, substantial changes in technology, and the increasing importance of libraries as a vital community hub and public resource.
- Across Ontario – in communities of all sizes – these budget pressures are reaching a tipping point.
- Public libraries are the focal point of municipalities across Ontario, and critical to social cohesion and community building. As a result, they find themselves on the front lines of many of the most critical challenges facing our communities, including homelessness, addiction and mental health, newcomer integration, re-skilling in a changing economy and overcoming the digital divide.
- Ontario's public libraries are proposing a targeted investment in additional operating funding for public libraries to specifically address critical areas of shared community and provincial priority, including:
    - Supporting economic recovery through job training and skills development;
    - Addressing the community impacts of mental health and addictions;
    - Providing services and resources to assist with high-needs members of the community such as seniors, newcomers, working families and all vulnerable members; and
    - Supporting early literacy and K-12 success.
- This investment, which would be in addition to and separate from existing provincial operating funding under the PLOG, would be shared across hundreds of Ontario libraries to provide predictable, flexible funding for local public libraries to respond to these critical areas of focus based on the needs of the people and the local communities they serve.
- This funding could be utilized to support ongoing operations, programming, resources, or front-line staffing specifically targeted to any of the four identified priority areas.
- The proposed level of investment corresponds to a restoration of the present value of the Ontario Government's support for Ontario's public libraries, addressing the impact of inflation, rising costs and other pressures over more than two decades.
- In conjunction with this investment, the Ontario Government and Ontario's public libraries would work alongside municipalities to ensure that this critical investment builds upon and enhances existing municipal support for public library budgets.
- *Projected cost:* $25 million / annually.

Ontario Library Association / Federation of Ontario Public Libraries

The Ontario Library Association (OLA) is the oldest continually-operating non-profit library association in Canada, with over 3,500 members comprised of library staff and supporters from public, school, academic, and special libraries.

The Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL) represents 237 public library systems in Ontario, including 39 Public Libraries on Reserves.

Together, OLA & FOPL are committed to ensuring that libraries can continue to play a critical role in the social, education, cultural and economic success of our communities and schools.