



The Honorable Eleanor McMahon,  
Minister Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport  
9th Floor, Hearst Block  
900 Bay Street  
Toronto, Ontario M7A 2E1

August 30, 2016

Dear Minister McMahon,

I am the executive director of the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries. FOPL represents Ontario's over 400 public library systems exceeding 1,000 branches in virtually every Ontario community including First Nations reserves. Over 5 million Ontario residents make hundreds of millions of visits to the library, in person and virtually, every year – and that is growing quickly. Libraries are trusted, accessible community hubs providing freely accessible professional service, technology, programs, and resources to a more diverse range of residents than any other cultural institution. Ontarians have voted with their library cards and passionate support for public libraries continues to grow in the digital age.

Several government funding changes at the provincial and federal level in recent years have the potential to damage Ontario's communities and damage the success of Ontario residents. This funding was usually added to provincial library operating funding as justification for the provincial government NOT increasing funding to public libraries in over 20 years! Combined with these new cuts this is not the case and public library systems are less well funded despite increases in the demand for and use of public library services.

Using the data collected by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport since 1998, we note that, in the past 10 years – despite the false assumptions about the web, e-books, and digital information – public libraries in Ontario have experienced:

- 23% growth in number of library cardholders across all libraries
- 14% growth in circulation
- 94% growth in number of community based programs
- 60% growth in program attendance
- 73% of Ontarians have used their public library in the past 12 months.
- All while growing digital visits to public library websites and services to over 50% of visits.

Our 2015 independent public opinion poll of Ontario residents by Market Probe Canada told us a lot about Ontarians:

- They value their public libraries to a very high degree as a top 5 service delivery of government.
- Too many, up to 24%, have a lack of access to the Internet at home or work and public libraries fill this gap. This is even more the case in rural, small town and first nations reserve settings.
- 25%-28% of Ontarians use the library's Wi-Fi and computer services and this is assisted by the Swiss-cheese access to the Internet in Ontario's non-urban centres. About 25% of all Ontarians do not have access to the Internet easily at home or work due to financial pressures or lack of affordable access in their area.

FOPL is writing to express our concern regarding the recent decision to reduce broadband funding for public libraries through the Connectivity Fund, which is administered by the Southern Ontario Library Service and Ontario Library Service-North. This in no way aligns with the government's repeated claims to ensure the full development of a digital economy and digital learning and literacy.

While we understand the fiscal challenges our province faces, this reduction, combined with other government cuts, will severely affect the ability of small and mid-sized libraries across Ontario to offer equity of service to meet the needs of citizens in the knowledge economy. It will play out in libraries through reduced access to job finding resources, learning and homework help, and more! Connectivity funding is crucial to offset the high cost of broadband access in Canada in order to bridge the "digital divide" between strong and weaker communities to ensure the access and success of all Ontarians.

While this is an issue in all communities and for all public libraries in Ontario, we are most concerned with the impact these cuts will have on small and rural communities in Ontario, where broadband penetration at the household level continues to be low, often more expensive and slower than in large urban centres. In my conversations with town councils and mayors across Ontario this topic always arises – unprompted.

People in these communities rely heavily on access to the Internet at their local public library.

We cannot overestimate the impact relative to cost of high-speed connectivity to public libraries, where it is an essential part of service delivery. One mid-sized library recently conducted a survey of the impact of community Internet access, finding that, for example, 8% of respondents had used library computers to successfully find a job. And we must also emphasize the particular importance of broadband access to libraries serving First Nations communities, where it helps preserve Indigenous culture and combat isolation, and in Francophone centres, where it connects people to services in both official languages. Libraries provide essential services requiring dedicated broadband support including:

- Pre-screening centres to allow for job seekers to avoid travelling to a larger city;
- Online exam proctoring;
- Access to high-quality online studies leading to certificates or degrees, often at an affordable cost and on a flexible schedule, allowing students to continue working while studying;
- Access to e-government services, including at dedicated Service Canada outlets and for Ontario government programs;
- 24-hour access to the Internet for purposes such as education, social inclusion, employment, and health matters. In addition to the recent decision to reduce broadband support, there have been two additional cuts that adversely affect the provision of digital services.

These include:

- Federal: changes to the Industry Canada (now Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada) Youth Internship Program. For twenty years, this program provided connectivity and hardware funding (this portion was discontinued in 2012) and funds for summer youth employment experience in the training and delivery of eservices. In 2014, the terms of this program changed resulting in small and mid-sized libraries becoming ineligible.
- Provincial: the Ministry decision to cease a dedicated e-resource fund that enabled significant cost savings in consortia purchasing and ensured that all public libraries in Ontario could offer a base-line selection of electronic information resources.

These three cuts within the last two years have removed too much funding from public library operating budgets, forcing small and mid-sized libraries to reduce other valuable services and programs.

We will continue to advocate at the provincial level about the ways in which libraries act as essential digital hubs for all Ontarians, and contribute positively to the social, cultural and economic well-being of communities. We look forward to making these points more fully in the review of public library funding announced in the Culture Strategy. Public libraries punch above their weight as Ontario's largest and most popular culture institution and the small subsidy provided by the provincial government for over 20 years of benefits to the province is inadequate and deserving of positive attention.

Sincerely,

*Stephen Abram*

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Cc Kevin Finnerty, ADM, Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport

Shelagh Paterson, Ontario Library Association