

# Developing a New Poverty Reduction Strategy for Ontario

## Ontario Library Association (OLA) and Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL) Submission

The Ontario Library Association and the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries welcome the opportunity to participate in the Ontario Government's consultation to develop a new five-year poverty reduction strategy. Our frontline experience supports the province's principle that finding new and innovative ways to serve people during challenging times is instrumental to creating the conditions to help them build a better life.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is highlighting the stark impact of poverty on communities across Ontario and the urgent need to support vulnerable populations. Public libraries have always been at the forefront of the poverty reduction efforts in Ontario. Reaching 98% of Ontarians in hundreds of communities of all sizes, public libraries are local, close to home, and adapt to the priorities of the people and communities they serve. Now more than ever, public libraries are helping to keep the public informed, educated, entertained and connected during this period of physical distancing. With their branches closed to the public, libraries continue to serve their communities, offering programming online, increasing e-collections available to individuals and families, and coordinating the delivery of food hampers and local community helplines. Once this pandemic is over, families, workers, businesses and vulnerable population will need more assistance than ever. It is essential that Ontario invest in community infrastructure, like public libraries, to help communities recover and reconnect.

Our submission provides information and context about the strategies and programs public libraries currently offer to reduce poverty in communities across Ontario as well as our recommendations for a provincial strategy. In particular, public libraries are experienced at delivering programming and services in each of the priority areas identified by the province:

- Encouraging job creation and connecting people to employment.
- Providing people with the right supports and services.
- Lowering the cost of living and making life more affordable.

# Recommendations

OLA and FOPL have engaged with our members across Ontario's public libraries to provide our best insight from the frontlines about the critical role they perform in reducing the impacts of poverty and how we can work together to take further positive steps. Based on our professional expertise, we are sharing the following recommendations from the public library sector:

- Clearly identify the importance of local public libraries as a crucial part of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy.
- Ensure that public libraries are eligible recipients for provincially-funded job skills and employment programs.
- Incentivize cross-sector collaboration to develop locally-focused supports and strategies to help reduce the impact of poverty at the community level.
- Increase and support broadband and Wi-Fi for public libraries to help fulfill the essential need from local residents for increased digital access.
- Support a provincially funded Ontario Digital Public Library to ensure that all Ontarians have access to a common suite of digital learning, employment and information resources, regardless of where they live or how they are able to access the public library.
- Support coordination across public libraries to build capacity and share best practices to improve local poverty reduction initiatives.

## About Ontario's Public Libraries

As Ontario's farthest-reaching, most cost-effective public resource and community hubs, public libraries are essential community partners in the province's poverty reduction strategy. Public libraries help millions of Ontarians independently train, learn and reach their potential. Reaching 98% of Ontarians in hundreds of communities of all sizes, public libraries are local, close to home, and adapt to the priorities of the people and communities they serve.

Trained, frontline library staff are people-focused, responding to these unique needs by developing, providing and offering:

- Job training and retraining programs and resources.
- Small business support and community economic development.
- Equitable, reliable access to broadband internet in underserved areas.
- Affordable, high-quality children's programs for young families.
- Frontline access and support for digital government services including through ServiceOntario.
- Strategies to support vulnerable populations.

Every dollar invested in public libraries generates significant direct economic benefits back to the community. Here are just a few examples:

- Vaughan: \$1 = \$5.57
- Milton: \$1 = \$5.67
- Pickering: \$1 = \$5.85
- Stratford: \$1 = \$7.48
- Ottawa: \$1 = \$5.17
- Halton Hills: \$1 = \$5.64

Public libraries' online and in-branch services are used extensively by everyone, especially by people with low incomes. A 2019 independent survey of Toronto residents demonstrated that 76% of residents with a household income of less than \$24,999 use the public library. Both users and non-users agree that libraries are an important community resource and a vital community space for bringing people together (95% and 80% respectively).

## Encouraging job creation and connecting people to employment

Public libraries are an essential community resource for connecting people to jobs and economic opportunity to help them prevent or break the cycle of poverty.

Libraries are important access-points for technology and broadband internet – especially for hundreds of thousands of Ontarians that cannot afford in-home internet access – as well as offering job training/re-training and employment help. Local public libraries have built strong partnerships with local employment services agencies to deliver these programs and services.

### Broadband internet and technology access

For job seekers who don't have a computer at home, the library is a one-stop-shop to search for jobs, prepare resumes and submit employment applications online. Public libraries provide 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. Where possible, public libraries provide Wi-Fi hot-spot lending programs, enabling people to "take the internet home with them" for a limited time.

According to the Technology Access in Public Libraries: Outcomes and Impacts for Ontario Communities report<sup>1</sup>, a study involving 50 urban, rural, First Nation and Francophone Libraries:

- **53%** of public library users reported that the public library was the only access point for the technology they used.
- **59%** of people using technology in public libraries engaged in educational activities and skills upgrading.
- **34%** of people used the technology to develop employable skills, and of those, 62% reported that they were able to 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.

### THUNDER BAY PUBLIC LIBRARY

In Thunder Bay, people looking to start a business know that the Thunder Bay Public Library is the best place to start. Through a partnership with the Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Commission and the PARO Centre for Women's Enterprise, the library works with budding entrepreneurs to do the necessary research to successfully create a business plan, including 1-on-1 research sessions to gather market research, group workshops, staff training and networking opportunities with the local business community.

With over a decade of proven success, over 100 start-up businesses are referred to the library every year – delivering real local economic development that benefits the community, the people and their families.

## Employment help

Libraries offer free programming and supports for job seekers. Examples of programs and services include:

- Job search skills
- Resume clinics
- Free printing for resumes
- Interview skills
- Technology skill training
- Digital labs that help local entrepreneurs prototype products.

### HALTON HILLS PUBLIC LIBRARY

Halton Hills Public Library offers proctoring services to help students meet their degree requirements. Students have access to a laptop and use of the library's partner rooms.

In 2019, the Library supervised 60 exams.

## Job training and re-training

Job training and re-training programs and resources help workers learn and build new skills, providing access to career-building and professional development courses. Each year, public libraries offer over 1,800 careers, job help and skills programs<sup>ii</sup>. In 2018, 284,000 Ontarians enrolled in over 700,000 online courses through local public libraries across Ontario. E-learning platforms, such as LinkedIn Learning (Lynda.com), Gale Courses, Mango Languages, Brainfuse, or RB Digital, contain resources for job training and re-training, lifelong learning and homework help.

In rural and Northern communities, public libraries are responsible for proctoring accreditation exams, allowing students from across the province to complete the degrees and diplomas they need to build a successful career.

## Providing people with the right supports and services

Public libraries are embedded in Ontario communities and understand the supports and services required by the people, families and communities they serve. Public libraries develop and maintain strong, effective partnerships with government and the non-profit sector to increase the reach, quality and impact of the services they deliver.

### Examples of library programs include:

- Implementing fine-free policies for youth and at-risk library users.
- Workshops on parenting, budgeting, cooking, and financial management.
- Developing partnerships with senior's facilities and low-income residences to circulate books and to develop locally relevant programs.
- Direct supports for vulnerable populations.

## **Increasing reach of existing services through community partnerships**

Public libraries are working closely with community organizations, including youth shelters, housing services, counselling, employment supports, settlement services and health agencies. Many rural communities do not have social services agencies locally and community members have few transportation options to visit those in nearby towns. To help address this gap, many smaller and rural libraries partner with regional and provincial social service agencies to provide space for these services and consultations in the library branch. Offering social services in the library is a strong community partnership that increases access to services in a welcoming, neutral location.

## **Strategies to support vulnerable populations**

Public libraries are embedded in Ontario communities, working with partners to address the root causes of poverty, such as education, housing, and mental health services, and aligning services to address these. Many libraries in urban centres staff social workers in the library and are investing in staff capacity to support high needs populations, through professional development like Mental Health First Aid Training for staff.

Ontarians experiencing the most extreme impacts of poverty in our province (homelessness, food insecurity, addictions, mental health issues, etc.) are not always ready or able to go directly into skills development. They have significant needs that must be addressed first (health, shelter, food, social assistance, etc.). Public libraries have built relationships in each community to address the root causes of poverty. At the same time, public libraries are building the trust, relationships, and referrals that will enable them to engage with those programs in the future. Public libraries support vulnerable populations to address these needs, offering both referrals to social assistance programming in the community through well-established partnerships with local providers, as well as direct access to resources like public health nurses and drop-in legal services at the library.

## **Settlement and Language learning**

Libraries support newcomers through programming at the library, and by collaborating with and developing partnerships with social and newcomer services. Each year, 135,456 people participate in over 9,703 newcomer focused programs at Ontario public libraries. Many libraries in communities with significant immigrant populations now host a dedicated settlement worker at the library, reducing barriers to community

### **MEAFORD PUBLIC LIBRARY**

The Meaford Public Library attends the Victoria Village (an affordable housing complex) Family Resource Centre meetings with other community stakeholders. These stakeholders include a community relations worker, public health employee, housing outreach worker, probation officer, residents of Victoria Village, and many others.

The library offers how-to sessions on accessing the e-resources and promotes library programs that are beneficial to the residents, in addition to learning what the needs of the community are.

### **MILTON PUBLIC LIBRARY**

In partnership with the Halton Multicultural Council, Milton Public Library facilitates three English Conversation Circles each week: two with a general conversational approach, and one with a focus on preparing for the Canadian Citizenship test. Settlement services, citizenship preparation courses, and commissioner of oaths services are also available, the latter in partnership with The Centre for Skills.

members accessing these services.

The sector is working collaboratively to improve the impact of these programs. FOPL has initiated the Mobile Information for Newcomers on Employment (MINE) project, helping public libraries be more efficient in their supports to newcomers by testing an innovative model for delivering information services and resources about employment, skills development, and financial literacy to under-served immigrant and refugee communities<sup>iii</sup>.

## **Supporting communities in responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, public libraries across Ontario have adapted to continue serving their communities' urgent needs. While libraries have closed their physical branches to members of the community, they are still operating virtually, providing access 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by offering a wide array of services and resources for people of all ages. They are supporting their communities to help keep the public informed, educated, entertained and connected during this period of physical distancing. Libraries are:

- Supporting their municipalities' COVID-19 responses.
- Coordinating phone check-in service to extend service and to mitigate isolation.
- Supporting local social services partners, like food banks.
- Supplementing K-12 learning resources while schools are closed.
- Facilitating access to digital collections – including e-books, e-audiobooks, e-magazines, and e-learning platforms as well as access to music, movies and more.
- Arranging digital library card renewals.
- Performing or posting virtual story times for children.

### **TORONTO PUBLIC LIBRARY**

During the COVID-19 emergency, Toronto Public Library supports the City's broader work on food security for Toronto's vulnerable residents. TPL opened six branch-based Food Banks as an alternate service location for existing food bank customers. On the first day of food distribution in a library location, library staff distributed 48 hampers, serving a total of 48 households and 136 individuals, including 43 children and 9 seniors. The library is also providing free books for kids in food hampers distributed through its pop up library branch food banks.

## **Lowering the cost of living and making life more affordable**

Public libraries make life more affordable for low-income people and families by increasing access to government supports and reducing financial pressures. Public libraries are a trusted source of information for Ontarians to improve financial literacy and access government services – particularly for those who lack broadband connectivity at home. Public libraries also help to improve the quality of life of Ontarians, providing a no-cost source of self-directed study, leisure and entertainment to people and families.

### **Access to Government Services**

Public libraries provide and expand frontline access to government services, for example, including being a ServiceOntario access point in dozens of communities. People can complete a growing

number of ServiceOntario transactions close to home at their local public library, saving them time and money otherwise spent travelling long distances to conduct an in-person transaction in a larger community. Public libraries help connect Ontarians to government supports through education and programming, including:

- Delivering financial literacy training and programming.
- Hosting tax clinics each year, in partnership with [Community Volunteer Income Tax Program \(CVITP\)](#) to low-income patrons.
- Connecting patrons to government programs such as Ontario Senior Dental Care program and Education savings for lower-income families.
- Providing one-on-one support for patrons in accessing and filling out government forms online.

## Leisure and Entertainment

The library is a no-cost source of leisure and entertainment to low-income families and individuals. For all individuals, libraries provide free access to books, multi-media, such as films and music, speakers, authors, cultural passes (to museums and art galleries), and a multitude of programming. While physical branches are temporarily closed to the public, libraries across the province are seeing a significant increase in the usage of their digital collections.

The library offers affordable, high-quality children's programs for young families, including drop-in playgroups, reading enhancements, homework help, tutoring, STEM clubs and more. This is particularly important for many families in high-needs communities and socio-economic groups, where the public library is one of the only options available for low-to-no cost, family-oriented programs in their community. Library early literacy programs support children's school readiness and fosters a love of reading, which research shows has a positive impact on success in science and math, literacy scores, and students' social and civic engagement<sup>iv</sup>. School and public libraries are both essential resources for students completing school assignments, providing necessary access to technology, educational databases, books and other materials. By investing in literacy skills and academic achievement at an early age, the library provides the foundation for later success in both educational and employment outcomes<sup>v</sup>.

### OTTAWA PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Ottawa Public Library's Bookmobile ran a series of visits to two of the City of Ottawa's emergency family shelters. At-risk youth were given the opportunity to create library memberships, borrow materials and enjoy on-site programming delivered by our expert children's staff. In order to remove barriers to accessing services, extra employees were assigned to have personal one-on-one conversations and help families deal with fines and charges for lost materials.

## Appendix: Recommendations

As Ontarians work together to support our communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, public libraries remain part of the essential community infrastructure to provide people with the right supports and services. Looking forward, libraries are uniquely positioned to be part of future solutions: with the established relationships needed to partner with local community agencies, bring together diverse stakeholders to reduce duplication of services and to increase the impact of community supports, and provide front-line service to families and individuals across the province. OLA and FOPL recommend that the upcoming Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy recognize public libraries as a key player in supporting poverty reduction in communities across Ontario by:

- Clearly identifying the importance of local public libraries as important part of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy.
- Ensuring that public libraries are eligible recipients for provincially-funded job skills and employment programs.
  - Grant or funding eligibility for any programs associated with the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy should include public libraries and First Nation Public Libraries as eligible funding recipients.
- Incentivize cross-sector collaboration to develop locally-focused supports and strategies to help reduce the impact of poverty at the community level.
  - Grant or funding eligibility for any programs associated with the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy should encourage cross-sectoral responses from community agencies, such as social service agencies, school boards, and public libraries.
  - Working together will ensure better outcomes for those in need in the community while delivering greater value for money.
- Increasing and supporting broadband and Wi-Fi for public libraries to help fulfill the essential need from local residents for increased digital access.
  - Ensure that residents of rural Ontario have reliable access to broadband connectivity by supporting local IT strategies and implementation for small and remote public libraries to ensure, expand and maintain access to digital resources.
- Supporting a provincially funded Ontario Digital Public Library to ensure that all Ontarians have access to a common suite of digital learning, employment and information resources, regardless of where they live or how they are able to access the public library.
  - As outlined in OLA and FOPL's 2020 Pre-Budget submission, invest in the creation of an Ontario Digital Public Library through an ongoing, multi-year investment by the province.
  - Ensure that all public libraries in Ontario have access to a core suite of e-resources, databases and e-books.
  - Enable negotiation of provincial and regional consortium and discounted pricing for e-resources and services, thereby achieving significant cost savings.
  - Develop an Ontario Digital Public Library platform and invest in requisite training and support to ensure that local public libraries are able to help local residents effectively use the extensive resource base.

- Supporting coordination across public libraries to build capacity and share best practices to improve local poverty reduction initiatives.
    - o Strengthen the Ontario Library Service Organizations capacity building initiatives, including training, networking, technology planning, and cross sectoral collaboration initiatives.
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## 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 5,000 members comprised of library staff and supporters from public, school, academic, and special libraries.

The **Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL)** represents 246 public library systems in Ontario, including 45 First Nations public libraries, in communities throughout the Province.

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.

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<sup>i</sup>Nordicity. *Technology Access in Public Libraries: Outcomes and Impacts for Ontario Communities*. Toronto Public Library, 2018. <https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/bridge/pdfs/nordicity-full-report.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup>Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries. *Public Library Statistics*, 2018. <http://www.mtc.gov.on.ca/en/libraries/statistics.shtml>

<sup>iii</sup>Federation of Ontario Public Libraries. *Ontario Trillium Foundation Grant to FOPL to Deliver Employment Information to Newcomers*, December 19, 2019. <http://fopl.ca/news/ontario-trillium-foundation-grant-to-fopl-to-deliver-employment-information-to-newcomers/>

<sup>iv</sup>People for Education. *Reading for Joy*, 2011. <https://www.accessola.org/web/Documents/OLA/issues/Reading-for-Joy.pdf>

<sup>v</sup>Community Literacy of Ontario. *Painting a picture of literacy*, 2013. [http://www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/literacy\\_why\\_it\\_matters.pdf](http://www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/literacy_why_it_matters.pdf)