

May 25, 2020

Hon. Steve Clark
Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing
17th Floor, 777 Bay Street
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

Hon. Lisa MacLeod
Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries
6th Floor, 438 University Avenue
Toronto, ON M7A 1N3

Sent via email to: Minister.MAH@ontario.ca; Minister.MacLeod@ontario.ca

Dear Minister Clark and Minister MacLeod:

RE: COVID-19 & Municipal Fiscal Impacts on Ontario's Public Libraries

On behalf of Ontario's public libraries, we are writing to bring your attention to the deteriorating situation for local public libraries in communities across the province due to municipal fiscal shortfalls caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These financial pressures are threatening the sustainability of dozens of public libraries in Ontario, putting these critical, cost-effective local resources at risk of permanent closure, particularly in rural and Northern Ontario.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, public libraries across Ontario have adapted to continue serving their communities' needs. While libraries have closed their physical branches, and are only now beginning to resume limited curbside services in accordance with provincial orders, they have operated virtually throughout this time, providing access 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They are offering a wide range of services and resources for people of all ages to help keep them informed, educated, entertained and, most importantly, connected during this period of self-isolation. This includes providing at-home access to their extremely popular digital resources, including e-books, e-audiobooks, streaming video and online research resources. Ontario's librarians have helped connect thousands of Ontario students with e-books and resources to keep them engaged and help them with remote learning.

Public libraries are also building upon a legacy of supporting vulnerable people in their community while adapting to the unique challenges of COVID-19. They are working with community agencies to share critical public health information, supporting the local public health and long-term care response, and opening emergency food bank locations in their branches.

The continuing support and funding from the Ontario Government for local public libraries remains invaluable for these ongoing operations. We were greatly encouraged to learn that the

province is expediting the release of its existing, annual provincial funding for local public libraries, including the Public Libraries Operating Grant. This is a welcome recognition of the financial pressures that local public libraries are facing in this difficult time.

However, as you know, over 90% of public library funding is provided by the local municipal government. The substantial and immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on municipal finances has created cash-flow issues for many municipalities, and our public libraries are already experiencing municipal government requests for staff downsizing, furloughs and budget cuts. In an April 2020 survey of public libraries conducted by the OLA, 51% of respondents reported staff layoffs.

We are especially concerned by the unilateral actions of several municipal councils that are taking steps to close or defund their local public libraries altogether. These actions, including terminating staff and changing library funding allocations, are being undertaken in contravention of the *Public Libraries Act* and without consultation of the independent public library board as the legally-designated operator and employer.

These cuts, if maintained, will have direct impacts on the ability of many public libraries to continue their operations beyond the next several months. Ontario's independent public library boards, which under Ontario's *Public Libraries Act* are responsible for the management and control of all local public libraries in the province, are working hard to supplement funding through available tools such as foundations, sponsorship and local promotion, but these efforts cannot replace the anticipated municipal funding cuts. Furthermore, as many of these libraries are in rural and Northern Ontario, this could undermine the province's anticipated expansion of broadband infrastructure and the potential for public libraries to partner with the Ontario government to bring it to these underserved communities.

In the spirit of your government's commitment to the sustainability of local public libraries in communities across Ontario, we are requesting your active engagement on this important matter:

- Provide clear guidance to all Ontario municipal councils and municipalities reiterating their obligations under the *Public Libraries Act*;
- Support local public libraries in their ability to serve their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic through increased provincial funding for digital and online resources, as outlined in OLA & FOPL's 2020 Pre-Budget Submission;
- Going forward, ensure that Ontario's public libraries are included in the development of any provincial recovery strategy for the re-opening and sustainability of municipal services and programming. We have already provided some initial recommendations through the Ministry of Heritage, Sports, Tourism and Culture Industries Festivals and Attractions Roundtable.



We appreciate your consideration of this pressing matter, and welcome the opportunity to engage with and further brief your staff at their earliest availability.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Shelagh Paterson'.

Shelagh Paterson
Executive Director,
Ontario Library Association

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Stephen Abram'.

Stephen Abram
Executive Director,
Federation of Ontario Public Libraries

Cc: Hon. Laurie Scott, Minister of Infrastructure