ONTARIO DIGITAL PUBLIC LIBRARY – BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

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Public libraries are critical infrastructure for successful, thriving communities across Ontario.

- Public libraries are Ontario's farthest-reaching, most cost-effective public resource and vital community infrastructure.

- It's much more than books: in most communities across the province, public libraries are either the most flexible – or the only – local resource with the capability to adapt and support emerging local needs and priorities.

- 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.

Public libraries are essential for bridging the digital divide.

- With access to many necessary resources, services and learning supports now primarily or entirely accessible online, 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.

- Over the past several years, the Ontario Government has recognized the crucial importance of public libraries to bridging the digital divide.

- These infrastructure and connectivity investments have built the necessary foundation to now take the next step to empower all Ontarians with the online resources they need to succeed – no matter where they live in Ontario.

Building the Foundation for the Ontario Digital Public Library

Since 2021, the Ontario Government has made the necessary targeted structural investments to ensure that all Ontarians can benefit from an Ontario Digital Public Library and the valuable learning, job skills and training resources it will provide.

- **Broadband Infrastructure:** $4.8 million investment to install or upgrade high-speed broadband internet connections at over 100 public libraries across rural, Northern and First Nations communities in Ontario.

- **Connectivity:** $582,000 annually – including a $122,000 increase in 2024 – to ensure that up to 155 eligible public libraries in small, rural and First Nation communities receive full funding to cover the ongoing costs of broadband subscriptions.

- **First Nations Public Libraries:** Through the 2024 Ontario Budget, $1.25 million in additional ongoing funding to help stabilize staffing and operations of First Nations Public Libraries on reserve in Ontario.

Providing equitable access to modern digital resources through public libraries is a logical next step under the *Building a Digital Ontario* plan.

- Digital resources provided through public libraries provide Ontarians with digital and online resources that contribute to student success and life-long learning, entrepreneurship and job readiness. These include:
  - o in-depth job and career skills training;
  - o language learning;
  - o live tutoring and homework help;
  - o health information; and
  - o resources to support vulnerable residents, such as seniors and adults living with developmental disabilities.
- In larger urban and suburban communities, residents can expect 24/7 access to powerful, subscription-based online resources.
- However, these resources are expensive, especially when purchased on a patchwork, library-by-library basis.
- For a well-resourced urban or suburban public library, these subscriptions cost many tens – or even hundreds – of thousands of dollars each year.
- 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.

Ontarians Living in Small, Rural and Northern Communities Lack Access

Across Ontario, access to powerful digital resources through local public libraries is very uneven. While Ontarians living in cities and major suburban communities may have excellent access, the picture is very different in other part of Ontario.

- According to the 2022 Annual Survey of Public Libraries, only 147 of our 363 library systems can afford subscriptions to five (5) or more resources.

- Meanwhile, 67 public libraries reported having zero (0) database subscriptions; the majority of which are First Nations public libraries on reserve.

The Ontario Digital Public Library: Expanding Access & Cost Savings –

Without More Bureaucracy.

- With the infrastructure and operating support in place, there is a logical opportunity to level the playing field.
- Ontario's public libraries are proposing the creation of an **Ontario Digital Public Library (ODPL).**
- By following the well-established approach used in Alberta and Saskatchewan and leveraging

the province's significant purchasing power, Ontario can give all Ontarians access to a universal set of high-quality e-learning & online resources through their local public library.

- The Ontario Digital Public Library, through volume purchasing, can provide digital resources **at a cost savings of up to 40%** when compared to a direct subscription by an average Ontario public library.

- Better still, most Ontarians would be able to access these resources directly through their local public library, whether at a branch, at home or on the go.

- A provincial investment in an Ontario Digital Public Library would **save costs for all public libraries** and help improve consistency of service delivery. This is an investment directly in the quality of supports that libraries can deliver – with the overwhelming majority of the investment going directly into digital resources.

- This is a red tape reduction-friendly approach that modernizes access to digital resources by making them available to all Ontario municipalities – and millions of Ontarians – for the first time.

- The Ontario Digital Public Library will **seamlessly integrate with existing public library infrastructure and operations,** without the need to significantly expand provincial bureaucracy to deliver it.

- **Recommended Annual Investment:** $10 – 20 million annually

How Would an Ontario Digital Public Library Work?

- Based on an annual provincial investment, Ontario's public library sector would work closely with the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming and agency partners to determine the appropriate mix of resources to deliver the greatest impact across the province.

- The designated delivery partner - such as the Ontario Library Service or another identified entity - would negotiate to secure province-wide access to a universal set of resources.

- Access to these resources will ideally be connected directly through local public library websites, providing a seamless experience for local users.

- Ontarians will be able to access the complete resource set either in-person at their local library, from home, or through their personal devices wherever they are.

- For those public libraries without an online presence, the Ontario Digital Public Library will maintain a direct online portal to provide access.

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.