

# Protecting Local Public Libraries Across Ontario

**Public libraries are an essential part of communities across Ontario – but many who depend on them are still falling through the gaps.**

- Public libraries are Ontario’s farthest-reaching, most cost-effective public resource and community hubs.
- The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how millions of Ontarians rely on local libraries in their daily lives: to work, to learn, to connect to community and government services, and to find or train for a job.
- Public libraries continue to provide access to important digital and in-person resources, including:
  - **Job training** – and re-training – programs and resources
  - **Small business support** and community economic development
  - **Equitable, reliable access to broadband** internet in underserved areas
  - **Frontline access and support for digital government services** through ServiceOntario
  - **Affordable, high-quality children’s programs** for young families
  - **Community and residence-based** seniors programming.
  - **Direct supports and partnerships with service agencies** to support vulnerable populations, including connecting to support services, food banks, and space for group programs
- Yet despite these essential supports, many individuals and families across the province are struggling and unable to access the local public library resources they need.
- Many of these gaps existed prior to the pandemic, but the ongoing health emergency has brought them to a critical point.
- There are public libraries on approximately 30% of Ontario First Nation Reserves and their situation is even more challenging as these libraries do not receive funding from municipal taxes. This has resulted in an unsustainable provincial funding model that has left many public libraries on reserve closed or with severely reduced access.

# Investing in public libraries will directly support communities and local economies recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through carefully targeted investments, the Ontario Government can make sure that all Ontarians – no matter where they live or learn – will continue to have access to much-needed modern, cost-effective resources and services through their local public libraries, during and beyond the pandemic emergency.

- 1. 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, thereby leveraging the province's significant purchasing power to give all Ontarians access to a common core of high-quality e-learning & online resources and more e-books.**
- 2. 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 increasing 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.**
- 3. Maintain critical provincial funding for Ontario's public libraries at current levels and work with municipalities and the Federal government to prevent unsustainable cuts to public library funding.**

## Priorities

- 1. 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, thereby leveraging the province's significant purchasing power to give all Ontarians access to a common core of high-quality e-learning & online resources and more e-books.**
  - 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.
  - 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 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 half the e-books and less than a third of the online databases as those living in Toronto – despite accessing them twice as often per capita as people in large urban communities.
  - 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 and more e-books through their public library.
  - **Projected cost:** \$9.4 million / annually

## 2. 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 increasing 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 maintain a sense of community and to minimize 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 40 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:

- Working with First Nations Public Library leaders, commit to implementing a sustainable provincial funding model for public libraries on reserve within the first 18 months.
- This funding model must ensure that operations of public libraries on reserve are sustainably funded and that frontline staff receive a living income for the important work they perform.
- 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).

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario First Nation Public Libraries Needs Assessment Report, 2017.

Available online at: <https://accessola.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2017-10-FNPL-Needs-Assessment.pdf>

### 3. Maintain critical provincial funding for Ontario's public libraries at current levels and work with municipalities and the Federal government to prevent unsustainable cuts to public library funding.

- Unlike most sectors in Ontario, provincial funding for public libraries has been frozen for over 25 years.
- Despite no net increase in provincial or municipal funding over this period, public libraries have effectively managed their resources, evolved to meet the needs of their communities and embraced major leaps in technology.
- **The Ontario government's 2021/22 Budget maintained funding directly to Ontario's public Libraries at \$22.3 million.** While the majority of public library budgets are municipally supported, the provincial portion of funding is critical to support operations (such as the Public Library Operating Grant), shared resources, broadband connectivity and pay equity. **Continuing to maintain this critical provincial funding at existing levels is vital to supporting local public libraries as they recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.**
- OLA and FOPL strongly urge the Ontario government to work with the Federal government and municipalities to ensure that our communities have the funding they need to protect jobs and the vital importance of local public libraries.

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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 40 First Nation 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.