

SUPPORTING RELIABLE PUBLIC LIBRARY INTERNET ACCESS FOR SMALL, RURAL AND FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

OLA / FOPL Ask

The Ontario Library Association (OLA) and the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL) request that the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming **extend eligibility for the Internet Connectivity Grant program to all public libraries serving communities of 20,000 or less.**

Extending eligibility for this grant program to all qualifying public libraries **builds upon enhancements made in the 2024 Ontario Budget** and will ensure that Ontarians living in small, rural and First Nations communities have reliable access to the high-speed internet and digital resources they need to learn, grow and thrive.

Background – Internet Connectivity Grant program

- The Internet Connectivity Grant program is a targeted initiative of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming that fully reimburses public libraries for the subscription costs of providing publicly accessible internet access.
- This grant program recognizes that public libraries provide critical access to reliable, publicly accessible high-speed internet for many Ontarians and are a critical part of ensuring that residents in small, rural and First Nations communities have access to online government services, skills training and career development.
- Since 2018, the Internet Connectivity Grant program has provided Ontario public libraries serving communities of 20,000 or less with more than \$3 million to ensure the communities they serve have reliable access to the internet.

Challenge – Extending Grant Eligibility to All Qualifying Public Libraries

- **The list of public libraries eligible to receive the grant has been frozen since 2018.**
- At that time, some public libraries serving communities of 20,000 or fewer did not apply to receive the grant as the physical infrastructure for reliable, high-speed internet access was not yet available in their region.
- Through the Ontario Government's historic investments in expanding broadband infrastructure to underserved regions, **most public libraries now can or will soon be able to connect to reliable, high-speed internet access.**
- **Subscription costs** – which are often significantly higher in small, rural and First Nations communities where connectivity options are limited – **are the major barrier to bringing public internet access to these communities** through the public library.
- 151 of 207 libraries serving communities of 20,000 or less received the Internet Connectivity Grant in 2024-25.

25% of public libraries serving communities of 20,000 or less do not receive the Internet Connectivity Grant.

Opportunity – Providing All Ontarians with Internet Access They Need to Learn, Grow and Thrive

- Extending eligibility for the Internet Connectivity Grant program to all public libraries serving communities of 20,000 or less is consistent with the Ontario Government's commitment to bring reliable high-speed internet to every community across the province by the end of 2025.
- The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming has recognized that public libraries are a critical access point for high-speed internet - especially in small, rural and First Nations communities where subscription costs are high and at-home access is not available or too expensive.
- Extending connectivity funding directly builds on recent investments made by the Ontario Government to support expanded availability of high-speed internet access through public libraries in small, rural and Northern communities.
 - In 2021, **the Ontario Government invested \$4.85 million to upgrade public library broadband infrastructure** in unserved and underserved communities. Through this investment, Ontario supported the installation or upgrading of broadband at 55 public libraries, with 20 sites having completed upgrades to date.
 - Through the 2024 Ontario Budget, **the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport invested an additional \$122,000 through the Internet Connectivity Grant**, for a total of \$582,000 annually, to ensure that public libraries receiving connectivity funding were fully for the costs of providing publicly accessible internet access.

Estimated Cost

Based on publicly available information¹, OLA & FOPL estimate that extending eligibility for the Internet Connectivity Grant to all public libraries serving communities of 20,000 or less would **cost a maximum of approximately \$145,000 annually**.

This reflects a 25% increase over the total 2024 grant program expenditure of \$582,000, which includes the funding enhancements introduced in the 2024 Ontario Budget.

While this estimate represents a maximum cost increase, the initial cost increase is expected to be less as not all eligible public libraries will have high-speed internet installed or accessible at their location.

¹ Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming, Ontario Public Library Statistics, Government of Ontario, last modified October 28, 2024, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-public-library-statistics>.

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.