



The Bibliographical Society of Canada  La Société bibliographique du Canada

www.bsc-sbc.ca

Hon. Doug Ford
Premier's Office
Room 281
Legislative Building, Queen's Park
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

16 May 2019

Premier Ford,

Today, I write on behalf of the Executive Council of the Bibliographical Society of Canada/la Société bibliographique du Canada (BSC-SbC), a bilingual scholarly association. Since 1947, the BSC-SbC has been dedicated to the study of the history, description, and transmission of texts in all media and formats, with a primary emphasis on Canada. We are deeply invested in the promotion of libraries and of access to information. Therefore, we strongly decry the Ontario Government's drastic cuts to the Ontario Library Service (OLS).

The Ontario Government's funding cuts to the Northern and Southern branches of the OLS will have a direct and negative impact on communities across the province. Essential projects such as the First Nations Language Portal require support in order to thrive and remain responsive to the needs of library patrons and library staff. The Virtual Online Community Library (VOCaL) allows individuals from remote areas to receive public library resources such as books, e-books, and audio books, through inter-library loan. This inter-library loan service is used heavily by public libraries in Ontario. For example, during the fiscal year of 2017-2018, the Southern Ontario Library Service "facilitated almost 440,000 borrowing requests from libraries and delivered almost 710,000 packages on [their] courier routes."¹ Without funding, programs like VOCaL and inter-library loan will fail and leave readers and learners cut off. Funding cuts will not only take resources away from the public, they will also render it extremely difficult for library staff to acquire training needed to purchase, catalog, and maintain print and online resources. First Nations Library Services and similar training programs provided by Ontario Library Service North will also be cancelled if funds are cut.

Some may argue that in a world where learners and readers increasingly rely on digital content, public libraries and the services they provide are no longer necessary. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Subscriptions to online resources are expensive and librarians require advanced training and skills in order to negotiate successfully with vendors of digital content. The Ontario Library Service provides this training and also negotiates on behalf of public libraries: in 2017-2018, 81% of the 311 public library systems in Ontario availed themselves of negotiating and preferred pricing services provided

by the Southern Ontario Library Service.ⁱⁱ Organizations like SOLS in fact save Ontarians money by negotiating fair prices for subscriptions to electronic subscriptions and resources.

In addition, high-speed Internet service is not available across the province. Without reliable internet service, rural and remote communities are unable to access digital content. The Ontario Government itself has underlined this reality in the 2019 Budget: “Many rural and remote communities do not have access to viable high-speed connectivity, which limits their ability to grow, innovate, provide important public services, develop a strong workforce and support economic development.”ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, not all families and individuals are able to purchase computers and mobile devices, and when they do own these items, they may have limited data plans that hamper their ability to access and download text and video resources. The local public libraries of remote and rural communities offer a safe haven and learning spaces for all, regardless of their ability to purchase computers and Internet service. For example, the public library of Phelps Township, where my elderly parents continue to reside, offers free wireless access to the Internet on its premises.

I write to you today as a library and information professional aligned with librarians across Canada to assert that all Ontarians have a right to access information and learning resources regardless of where they live and how much money they make. Like my colleagues on the BSC-SbC executive council, I firmly believe in the enduring value of libraries and of institutions like the OLS. I also write to you also as a Northern Ontarian whose life and career have been shaped by the Province’s public libraries. I was born to working-class parents in North Bay, Ontario, and I resided in the small rural community of Redbridge, Ontario, for my entire childhood and adolescence. Every week, my mother would take my three siblings and me to our local library, the Phelps Public Library, founded through a Wintario grant. I learned to read from books in that library; later, as a teenager, I volunteered there and even received a Lieutenant Governor’s Community Volunteer award for my service at the public library and at the library of my high-school, St. Joseph Scollard Hall. Eventually, my dedication to libraries, inspired by my early engagement with the Phelps Public Library, led me to become an information science professional and a special collections librarian. I wasn’t the only local child to benefit from the Phelps Public Library. In the mid-1990s, my older brother and several other local teenagers received training on the use of computers in the basement of the library. This training helped my brother on his path to becoming an environmental scientist and a professor at Canadore College, while his peers are now computer scientists and registered nurses contributing to the well-being of our Northern communities.

Throughout my life, public libraries have been safe spaces and portals to learning that allowed my rural friends and family and me to expand our intellectual horizons and gain new skills. The public libraries of Northern Ontario continue to do so today for a new generation of children, including my nieces and nephews, and for communities of users whose learning and reading needs cannot always be met by a quick search over the Internet. As an example, one of my family members freelances as a naturalist and a translator of botanical texts. She has relied on the North Bay Public Library’s interlibrary loan services to borrow hard-to-find scientific texts that are currently unavailable online (and unlikely to be so in the future).

These are just some personal examples that I hope help demonstrate how libraries are transformative spaces at the heart of communities across Ontario. By restoring funding to the Ontario Library Service, whose operating budget is modest compared to those of other publicly-funded programs, the Ontario Government will ensure that all Ontarians will have free access to information, knowledge, skills and training that allow them to reach their fullest potential as citizens

and contributors to the well-being of the Province. The Ontario Library Service is a sound investment of provincial dollars: it achieves economies of scale, negotiates lower subscription rates on behalf of many institutions, and it helps maintain an information network that ensures and informed and engaged citizenry.

On behalf of the BSC-SbC, I urge you to reconsider the funding cuts to the Ontario Library Service.

Sincerely,



Ruth-Ellen St. Onge

President of the Bibliographical Society of Canada / La Société bibliographique du Canada

On behalf of the executive council of the BSC-SbC:

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And the members of the BSC-SbC Council.

ⁱ Southern Ontario Library Service. *Annual Report 2017-2018*, p. 1 URL: <https://www.sols.org/files/docs/about/board/AnnualReport2018.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Government of Ontario. "9. Supporting Rural and Northern Communities. Improving Broadband Service to Underserved Areas." *2019 Ontario Budget*. URL: <http://budget.ontario.ca/2019/chapter-1d.html>.