

OLA and FOPL E-mail to the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries – March 17, 2020

While most public libraries made the decision to close to the public March 14, The OLA and FOPL appreciate the Governments decision March 17 to close all public libraries to ensure that library staff and the public reduce the risk of spreading the virus. We want to be sure the public is aware that while physically closed, many public and First Nation libraries offer an array of 24/7 digital services including e-books, digital reference resources, streaming music and movie services, learning resources and more. In addition, libraries are ensuring the public is aware of extended loan periods for books that are checked out and ways to renew or get library cards virtually. These services will vary in communities across Ontario. Public libraries are displaying these options prominently on their web sites and social media platforms.

In terms of immediate impacts on public libraries, we wanted to bring the following two important issues to your attention:

- We have reached out to public libraries to ask about staffing impacts. We anticipate there may be impacts in some communities for part-time or occasional staff where those structures are in place. We would have to re-assess for longer term closures. While Public Libraries remain closed to the public, there are options for isolated work on administrative tasks and supporting e-services. Libraries are currently identifying and planning necessary tasks that can be worked on in isolation, with social distancing and to ensure employee safety. It would be helpful if the ministry could clarify that public library closure is not a directive to prevent library employees from working during this time and that this is a decision to be made by local public library management.
- We anticipate an increased demand for popular library services such as e-books while families are in self-isolation. Currently the cost and circulation limits of e-books imposed by e-book providers reduce the ability for public libraries to expand or increase circulation. This results in long waiting lists, especially for popular titles. If there is one immediate support for the public library sector to help Ontarians, it would be to support expanded access to e-books. Currently Southern Ontario Library Services manages the e-book purchasing and platform and could work with OverDrive should there be any additional financial supports to expand access.

Please feel free to contact us at any time if we can assist with any questions or concerns about Ontario's public libraries.