

March 23, 2017

Office of the Premier
226 Legislative Building
Regina, Saskatchewan
CANADA S4S 0B3

Attn: The Honourable Brad Wall

Re: Cuts to Saskatchewan Public Libraries

Dear Premier Wall:

The Canadian Health Libraries Association/Association des bibliothèques de la santé du Canada (CHLA/ABSC) is adding its collective voice to those expressing concern regarding the elimination of funding for public libraries in Regina and Saskatoon. Without sufficient provincial funding, libraries will be forced to reduce programs, collections, and services that are essential to general literacy, community services, and the health literacy of the patrons whom the libraries serve.

Public libraries are important providers of consumer health information both in print and online. The Internet is the primary resource for people who take an interest in their own health, and many consumers turn to their public libraries to access the Internet for health information (Zickuhr, Rainie, & Purcell, 2013). Public libraries tend to be one of the first places of contact for general inquiries on infectious diseases and emerging illnesses (Arding & McLeod, 2013). According to the Canadian Internet Use Survey, 69.9% of Canadians search for medical or health related information online, and 9.5% of Saskatchewan survey respondents use public libraries for Internet access, a number that has seen a steady increase over time (Statistics Canada, 2009). Research indicates that Saskatoon's lowest income neighbourhoods have significant health outcome disparities compared to the rest of the city (Lemster

& Neudorf, 2008); access to quality consumer health information for those with a low socioeconomic status is a key service that public libraries provide. Additional cuts to seven regional library systems will negatively affect smaller rural libraries. Research indicates that those residing in rural and remote communities typically have poorer health status than those living in larger centres (Romanow, 2002), and therefore, public libraries that serve rural populations have an obvious positive impact on their communities' needs for consumer health information (Flaherty, 2013). I point you to the proactive approach recently taken by Toronto libraries who partnered with Google to allow public library branches in low-income neighbourhoods to borrow WiFi hotspots (CBC News, 2016), an outside-the-box approach with obvious benefits.

As distressing as the funding cuts are, CHLA/ABSC is also deeply concerned with statements made by the Honourable Don Morgan regarding his attitude toward libraries (Dao, 2017). For the Minister of Education to state that "a library may not be a place that should be used as a sanctuary" and that "...we should be getting out of bricks and mortar libraries and people should be focusing on electronic or alternate media" is short-sighted and a clear indication of his ignorance of the breadth of quality programs and services that public libraries provide to communities. A similar myopic view is what led Newfoundland and Labrador's Minister of Education, Dale Kirby, to announce the closure of half the province's libraries in 2016. Public outcry, provincially and nationally, led to a series of public consultations and a suspension of the closures.

On behalf of the Board of Directors and the members of CHLA/ABSC, I urge the government of Saskatchewan to reconsider funding cuts as well as develop and implement public consultations to better inform the government of the value and impact that public libraries provide to the people of the province. I would be happy to discuss this further with you.

Yours sincerely,

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President, CHLA/ABSC
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cc. Hon. Don Morgan, Q.C., Deputy Premier, Minister of Education
Mr. Lukas Miller, President, Saskatchewan Health Libraries Association
Mr. Michael Shires, President, Saskatchewan Library Association

References

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