24/7 Help Desk Study[1]
Final Report to Industry Canada
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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past five years, Ontario Public Libraries have received funding from public and private sector sources to assist them to connect to the Information Highway. The funding is to support the development of an Ontario library network. The network makes library resources widely available through the Internet, and allows public libraries to develop new ways to better serve their communities.

At the same time, the Federal Government began implementing its Connecting Canadians Initiative. Beginning in 1995, Industry Canada began the Community Access Program (CAP). The goal of the CAP program is to give residents of all rural, remote and urban communities across Canada affordable access to the Internet, and to provide new ways to communicate, learn and do business in today's knowledge-based economy. <u>Ontario libraries play a key role in the Community Access Program.</u>

Libraries in Ontario have also benefited from Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Canadian Grant Program. This is the Foundation's single Canadian program for making grants to public libraries serving low-income communities. It was developed keeping in mind the lessons the Foundation learned while implementing the first round of grants in the United States. The program follows the Foundation's mission of partnering with public libraries to bring access to computers, the Internet, and digital information for patrons in low-income communities and those caught in the digital divide in the United States and Canada. According to the Gates Foundation's web site:

> "And library computers are the only source of access for more than half of those who are unemployed but looking for work. Also notable is the fact that library traffic and staff morale increased significantly in libraries that received computers and training."

The draft Business Plan for Toronto Public Library's Virtual Reference Library, 2001-2002 identifies a new government funded study which shows "*a growing digital divide between the country's rich and poor, **despite attempts at all levels of government to bridge the chasm**"*. The plan further cites an article off the Canadian Press Newswire,