

# Public Libraries

## Helping communities thrive in a changing world

Our world is changing in significant ways. Technology alone is responsible for enormous shifts in how we do most things and how we make sense of our world. Other forces of change include an aging population, new kinds of work requiring new skills, growing cultural diversity, increased urban density, ever greater social inequities, and a struggling world economy. More often than not, there are also local issues that compound these societal trends, such as the loss of manufacturing jobs and/or a diminished tax base.

Anyone involved in local government, whether elected or employed, is all too familiar with the impact of these changes on the people and communities they serve. Along with other levels of government, today's municipal leaders are charged with the daunting task of building the community's capacity to not just survive, but thrive, against a backdrop of social and economic turbulence.

While every municipal service plays an important role in the community, there is one that is uniquely positioned to contribute to the work of capacity building. This country's public libraries routinely help individuals, families, neighbourhoods, and communities adapt to changing circumstances so that they can face the future with the resilience that comes from new knowledge, information, skills, and abilities.

### The Library as a Community Resource

Traditionally understood as providers of books, music, movies, and programs for children, public libraries are so much more than that. In addition to circulating collections, electronic as well as traditional, public libraries offer free public access to information technology. They also serve

as crucial public space where community members can congregate, connect with one another, learn together and participate in community conversations. Because of the breadth of their reach, public libraries are well-positioned to play an important role in community capacity building.

It is the work of municipal leaders, in consultation with their community, to establish the particulars of what capacity building should look like for a given community. A quick scan of municipal strategic plans shows current directions include such things as revitalizing the downtown core, developing the community as a retirement destination, providing retraining and workforce development programs, engaging newcomer populations, and improving quality of life by addressing such things as access to health care, education and green space, and spearheading neighbourhood renewal projects.

It is important that municipal leaders recognize the public library's ability to make significant contributions to many of these broader community initiatives. For example, public libraries have long served newcomers to the community and play an important role in helping newcomers to settle in and, ultimately, to develop a sense of belonging. Access to community information, orientation and guidance to government services, language classes, family programs, and multilingual collections are just some of the ways in which public libraries assist newcomers in navigating community life. In addition, public library staff have considerable experience

in community engagement and can be an important resource for teaching and engaging newcomers.

Municipal officials charged with branding the community as a retirement destination do well to include public libraries in the roster of amenities available. Today's active seniors are hungry for experiences and opportunities to continue learning. In many communities, seniors flock to their local library daily, whether to attend a book club or travelogue presentation, to email grandchildren, to browse magazines and newspapers, to get assistance with their new e-readers, or to simply visit with each other. As well, many in this population, including recently and soon-to-be retired baby boomers, are keen to volunteer and the library can help connect these individuals with meaningful work.

Public libraries also contribute to community-wide efforts to cultivate a skilled workforce. Library computers, staff, collections, and programs are valuable resources to those engaged in learning or upgrading skills, producing a resume and finding employment.

### Addressing Social Inequity

One of the most important contributions public libraries can make is in helping municipalities address social inequity. According to the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, healthy communities are characterized by peace, equality, and social justice.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, social equity is

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1. Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition. "What makes a healthy community?" Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition <[www.ohcccso.ca/en/what-makes-a-healthy-community/](http://www.ohcccso.ca/en/what-makes-a-healthy-community/)> (28 February 2012).

increasingly understood as one of the pillars of community sustainability, along with environmental stewardship, culture, and economic development. Based on the premise that universal access to information is a human right and a cornerstone of a functioning democracy, the very mission of the public library as an institution is to level the playing field for literacy, lifelong learning, and access to information and information technology.

Every day, public libraries help bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots with staff who know how to assist people in finding information, public workstations and free access to the internet, guidance in using technology, collections that meet people's information and leisure needs, literacy classes and collections, and an endless variety of educational programming. Public libraries make it possible for all members of society, including those living in poverty, to access the information and ideas they need to conduct their lives.

In fact, public libraries ensure everyone has access to the information and ideas they need at every age and stage of life. At this time in human history, when change is inevitable and lifelong learning an imperative, public libraries help citizens and communities adapt. Even in this era of ubiquitous technology, people continue to turn to public libraries when faced with personal decisions and the need to learn or understand something new. In essence, public

libraries help residents build resilience and get good at change.

### Community Identity and Culture

Because of their expansive reach and broad appeal, public libraries are deeply and inextricably connected to community identity. In planning and delivering library service that is truly responsive to local needs, those who work in public libraries become intimately familiar with the community's cares and concerns, interests, and aspirations. In collaborating with other agencies and key players in the community, they learn even more. In turn, this knowledge is used to ensure library services remain relevant to changing needs.

This knowledge of the community is, in and of itself, an important library service as residents frequently approach the library seeking information. They do so even when there are other community information services available. Whether putting a question to staff, browsing pamphlet racks and bulletin boards, or engaging other program participants in conversation, library users turn to the library as a means of connecting with the community. Libraries help connect individuals with the community resources that meet their needs.

This knowledge of the community is also used to reflect the community back to itself, generating a strong sense of identity and culture. Library facili-

ties, collections, exhibits, programs, and special events all serve to cultivate community identity and connectedness. Art exhibits profile the work of local artists. The community's love of hockey and fiddling are reflected in the library's collections. The reading garden is a favourite hangout on summer afternoons and evenings. Local authors and musicians are featured in library events. A local history display generates pride in the community's response to a natural disaster. The library-sponsored dragon boat race has become a popular annual event, drawing thousands every year. The library's meeting room is used by municipal leaders for a community-visioning exercise. A new branch library anchors a neighbourhood renewal project.

Communities with a well-developed sense of community and a strong social fabric are healthier communities. They are more resilient, more creative, and more capable of thriving, even in turbulent times. Municipalities and public libraries are natural partners in their efforts to build community and nourish local culture.

The world will continue to change, and the ability to learn and adapt will only grow in importance. Regardless of the particular challenges presented locally, municipalities can rely on public libraries to be part of the solution and share in the work of building the community's capacity to respond with resilience and optimism. MWV

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