

“Reading Re-Imagined” A Response from the Canadian Library Association

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The Canadian Library Association (CLA) appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Conceptual model/Business plan prepared by CNIB and released on March 30, 2012. This model was developed in support of “A National Digital HUB to support service delivery to Canadians with print disabilities.”

CLA believes that libraries and the principles of intellectual freedom and free universal access to information are key components of an open and democratic society.

It has long been recognized that Canadians with print disabilities should not have to rely on a charity while their peers have access to information through publicly funded libraries. At the June 2003 Annual General Meeting of CLA, a resolution was unanimously passed proposing the establishment of a national equitable library network. CLA subsequently established a Working Group to Define a National Network for Equitable Library Service. The Working Group completed its work in September 2005 and presented its report, *Opening the Book : A Strategy for a National Network for Equitable Library Service for Canadians with Print Disabilities*. The report was presented to the Librarian and Archivist of Canada and in 2007 the Initiative for Equitable Library Access (IELA) was established within Library and Archives Canada to create a long term strategy to improve the provision of equitable library access to reading materials for Canadians with print disabilities. While The IELA initiative did not result in a definitive long term strategy, CLA feels that the fundamental principles embedded in *Opening the Book* and reiterated in the work of IELA remain even more valid today and moreover that the public library system in Canada is now poised to take the leadership role.

CLA reiterates the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and particularly its Article 21 which states that nations “shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to ... receive ... information and ideas on an equal basis with others ... including by providing information intended for the general public.” This Convention was ratified by the Government of Canada in March 2010. These rights are reinforced by guarantees in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

It is the position of CLA that the provincial and territorial agencies responsible for the Canadian public library network should continue to have primary leadership for the provision of equitable

public library access to information for persons with print disabilities. CLA would strongly advise against the development of an additional costly infrastructure. That being said, some form of coordinated management will be required to support central activities such as training, education, advocacy, standardization and negotiation. It is also too early to tell whether the full range of published material will be produced at source in alternative formats and the need for a modest facility to facilitate production may continue to be necessary. A central organization will also be required to facilitate innovative and enriched partnerships to maximize existing resources, knowledge base, and intellectual capital. Whether such a central organization needs to be a “bricks and mortar” facility or some form of organization based upon intergovernmental and public-private agreements remains to be determined.

The ability of governments to provide sustained funding for a non-governmental organization is limited at best. Long-term viability cannot be guaranteed by the provision of government grants and private funding is unlikely to provide sufficient resources. It seems much more likely that provincial and territorial governments, already responsible for public library service, could jointly fund the central operations required to underpin enhancements to public library service for persons with print disabilities.

The present proposal has a strong focus on CNIB Library’s organizational evolution. For example, the last point in the “Imperative to Act” states that if “the HUB, as conceived in this plan, is not achieved, CNIB will need to balance its library clients’ needs with the broader CNIB vision and expectations, and go-forward options will be presented to the CNIB Board of Directors.” There is no doubt that the existing rich CNIB infrastructure will be enormously supportive to whatever structure eventually emerges, but it is also clear that public and other types of libraries also possess rich resources and technologies that can be leveraged to advance the cause of equitable library service.

CLA believes that the only sustainable solution to equitable access for all is to expedite the production of multiple formats at source. Not only would this provide libraries with access to appropriate materials but persons with print disabilities would have the same direct access to published material as the broader community already has. Federal and provincial governments can have significant influence over this solution through initiatives designed to support the book publishing industry. Examples that already exist include the federal policy framework designed to support the Canadian-owned book publishing industry, the Ontario Media Development Corporation Book Fund and the Manitoba Book Publishers Tax Credit.

Canadians use all kinds of information resources and should have access to various formats for educational and recreational purposes. General citizens, students, business people, educators, and entrepreneurs, require a wide spectrum of information. It is therefore essential that a centralized organization capitalize on the entire range of material and technology that is available and profit from information produced by all types of libraries and other organizations. This is partially recognized in the CNIB document through the *Living Lab* concept which will bring together interested parties to “develop and implement innovative projects.” CLA recognizes that many such projects already exist and suggests that they must be exploited to maximize the use of existing resources. In particular, there must be an intersection with academic institutions, including CAER (Canadian Association of Educational Resource Centres for Alternate Format

Materials) and public libraries for digital, large print and braille content already purchased or produced by public dollars. These resources should be harnessed to develop a much enlarged content capability and to build on existing e-books that can be transformed into alternative formats.

The CNIB HUB proposal is predicated on a public-private business model with one third of its funding coming from the private sector. Presumably some of this funding will come from the publishing sector. CLA would caution that it be clear that any financial arrangements avoid any possibility of influence on collection development. The concept of intellectual freedom is vitally important to libraries and must be protected. Similarly, financial arrangements with producers of assistive devices must take care to avoid external influence on freedom of expression in libraries. Furthermore, it is vital that no undertaking be allowed to undermine rights already available under Canadian copyright legislation.

In summary, CLA believes that the provincial and territorial agencies responsible for the Canadian public library network should continue to have primary leadership for the provision of equitable access to public library information for persons with print disabilities. This should be accomplished through some form of organization based upon intergovernmental and public-private agreements, maximizing the use of existing resources, technologies and innovation in Canadian libraries, in CNIB and in the private sector. Furthermore, the federal, provincial and territorial governments must be strongly encouraged to continue to facilitate the production of alternate formats by the book publishing industry at source with a view to ultimately mainstreaming access to information to Canadians with print disabilities.

Prepared on behalf of the Library Services to People with Print Disabilities Advisory Committee