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A Progress Report on the Initiative for Equitable Library Access

February 2009



Introduction

An estimated one in three Canadians lives with a disability.¹ For one in ten of them, it is a print disability.² These prevent people from reading standard print due to vision impairment, a learning disability or a disability that prevents them from physically holding a book. Canadians with print disabilities require publications in multiple formats, such as braille, audio, large print and electronic text. They may also require assistive technology to meet their information needs.

Less than five percent of published materials are available in a format these Canadians can use. In 2007, the Minister of Canadian Heritage asked Library and Archives Canada (LAC) to address this inequality by establishing the Initiative for Equitable Library Access (IELA).

IELA aims to create the conditions for sustainable and equitable library access so that Canadians with print disabilities can enjoy the kinds of public library services already available to those who read conventional print. It will result in a strategy to build nationwide partnerships and to support activities and services that will successfully meet the long-term library and information access needs of Canadians with print disabilities.

This progress report provides an overview of activities that have taken place across Canada since IELA was launched in October 2007.

¹ Profile of Disability in Canada: An Overview (2001), Statistics Canada

² Opening the Book: A Strategy for a National Network for Equitable Library Service for Canadians with Print Disabilities (2005), Canadian Library Association



Consultations

The nationwide strategy will be informed by discussions with stakeholders and IECLA maintains an ongoing dialogue with these groups.

During the past 14 months, IECLA has reached out to a broad spectrum of stakeholders across Canada, including:

- Small, medium and large public libraries;
- Disability groups;
- Representatives from provincial and territorial governments;
- The Canadian publishing industry; and
- Multiple format producers, the not-for-profit and the private sectors.

These consultations have helped IECLA to more clearly understand the challenges libraries face in providing equitable library access for Canadians with print disabilities. At the same time, they have brought together potential partners and defined new approaches and opportunities. Here are some of the highlights of these consultations.

Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians (AEBC)

“Blind Canadians are not simply affected by the accessibility of public libraries, our rights as citizens are what is at issue for us.”

More than 30 members of AEBC from across Canada met with IECLA in May 2008 to discuss key issues, including:

- The capacity of libraries to lend specialized equipment such as DAISY players to enable people with print disabilities to read navigable audiobooks;



- Ready access to library catalogues that include all available material;
- Training for public library staff to learn about assistive technology and how to respond to the needs of people with print disabilities; and
- The availability of multiple formats, reference materials and options for keeping people with print disabilities up-to-date on events and new acquisitions.

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC)

In October 2008, IELA participated in a focus group on library access at the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) Nova Scotia Conference in Halifax. Discussions focused on a number of areas for action, including preferred reading formats (PDF and Word), the availability of digital materials such as e-books, and assistive technology needed at libraries.

Among the issues discussed were:

- The need for designated resource people to assist those with print disabilities;
- Options for improved signage;
- Word anticipation functionality on catalogue search, including features such as “did you mean...?”; and
- Posting of related events and other information on the Web which can then be read using assistive technology.

IELA is working with LDAC to better understand the library needs of people with learning disabilities in preparation for additional consultations over the next year.



Panel Discussion

On December 3, 2008 LAC celebrated the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, Canada's signing of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and the 200th anniversary of the birth of Louis Braille with a panel discussion on IELA. The speakers included Ian E. Wilson, Roch Carrier, Jim Sanders and the Honourable James Huggessen. The program is available as a webcast in both official languages on the LAC website.

Focus Groups on Public Library Service

Front-line library staff, managers and readers with print disabilities were the key participants at public library focus-group sessions held in West Vancouver, Toronto and Halifax in September 2008. The sessions examined the following questions:

What are the roles and responsibilities of front-line public library staff in providing equitable service?

- What collection issues need to be resolved and how?
- What issues related to assistive devices need to be resolved and how?
- What support systems must be in place (local, provincial or national), what roles and responsibilities will they have and how will libraries access their services?

The three sessions reflected considerable support on the part of libraries and resulted in more than 30 action priorities being identified.



Participants concluded that public libraries:

- Serve virtually every Canadian community as core institutions;
- Serve a wide range of clients but are limited in their capacity to serve people with print disabilities due to lack of adequate training, specialized staff and funding;
- Need centralized expertise to better serve people with print disabilities;
- Need to promote their services more actively;
- Must partner with disability organizations, consumer organizations and vendors which specialize in services to people with print disabilities;
- Support increased availability of multiple formats in the commercial marketplace; and
- Recognize the challenges associated with changing technologies including cost and other issues relating to the use of assistive devices.

Survey of Canadian Public Libraries

In July and August of 2008, the Canadian Library Association (CLA), as part of the IELA Working Group, conducted a survey of public libraries in Canada. The survey was distributed to Canadian Urban Libraries Council member libraries as well as representatives of the Provincial and Territorial Public Library Council and their constituents, generating responses from all ten provinces and all three territories. Two hundred and fifty one survey responses were returned, a response rate of 40 percent, representing 1,957 points of service and almost eight million library users. The survey response indicated a strong interest in the issue of



equitable library access and gave IELE a clearer sense of the landscape in terms of specific challenges, opportunities and issues.

The survey contained specific questions about the size and format of collections aimed at Canadians with print disabilities; the availability of specialized equipment, furniture or training; public Internet access; and whether a library subscribes to CNIB's Visunet service.

Preliminary Survey Findings:

- The bigger the library, the more specialized collection and equipment is available, and the more likely such libraries are to offer downloadable audiobooks or e-books;
- Urban libraries tend to have more specialized material available;
- Very few libraries, regardless of size, have a person designated to assist persons with print disabilities;
- Multiple format collections are heavily weighted to large-print books and spoken-word audio cassettes, while CDs occupy the third largest share of collections, followed by downloadable books;
- The number of downloadable books available is notable, given that these libraries would have mainly begun developing their downloadable collections within the last couple of years; and
- Smaller libraries have very limited multiple format holdings. This appears to reflect the challenges these libraries have in stretching available budgets to address the needs of the relatively small populations of readers with print disabilities in their communities.



Research

To support the development of meaningful change, IECLA conducts research to obtain the most up-to-date information. The highlights of this research so far are described below:

Study of Audiobook and e-Book Publishing in Canada

“An increasing selection of digital book content presents new opportunities for print-disabled readers, especially when twinned with assistive technologies for readers with disabilities.”

This study provides the first comprehensive overview of audiobook and digital book publishing in Canada. It explores current issues and trends in the production, distribution, and use of non-print formats, as well as digital publishing as it pertains to both the mainstream reading audience and to people with print disabilities.

Looking at two broad formats, audiobooks and e-books, the study identified a dynamic, rapidly evolving and growing digital marketplace that is increasingly being shaped by changing consumer demand and new technologies.

First, there is a rapidly growing market for audiobooks in Canada. At a growth rate of eight to ten percent a year, the pace significantly outstrips overall growth in the book market. The study concluded that mainstream audiences are primed for digital; that digital devices are on the rise; and that the digitization of book content is increasing rapidly.

However, the study also identified significant challenges. For example, there is relatively little Canadian content in sales channels for digital editions because the Canadian market for digital book content is largely shaped by major international publishers. In addition, the availability of digital books does not guarantee accessibility, given the variety of



formats, the computer skills that might be required and the cost of equipment. Finally, the management of rights and copyright can affect a publisher's decision whether to produce electronic editions.

The study concludes with an overview of how digital editions are collected and circulated by public libraries in Canada, as well as a discussion of factors that encourage or discourage the availability and use of non-print resources in Canadian libraries.

Study of the Library Book Rate and Literature for the Blind Programs

This study examines the Library Book Rate and Literature for the Blind Programs in the context of resource sharing for Canadians with print disabilities. It provides a summary of current programs and recommendations on how they can be improved to facilitate resource sharing, inter-library loan and home delivery of library materials in multiple formats.

Background Paper on the Advances of Resource Description for Multiple Format Materials

A background paper has been commissioned by IELA focusing on how cataloguing rules will affect access to catalogue records for multiple format materials. These include the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR) and the new Resource Description and Access (RDA) rules.

The background paper will provide a description of the merits of FRBR display for multiple format materials to improve the process of resource discovery for Canadians with print disabilities. It will also discuss how RDA will improve the description of, and therefore access to, multiple format materials. A final paper will be provided to IELA in March 2009.



Tools and Training

In addition to consultation and research, IELA is working towards the creation of tools and training that will support equitable library access in Canada. Highlights are described below:

Electronic Clearinghouse

An electronic clearinghouse for multiple format production will enable publishers to make their electronic files available quickly and securely to producers of multiple formats. The original Clearinghouse began as a pilot project at LAC. Following a review of recommendations made in the pilot, IELA has been working to improve the clearinghouse from a basic form to an e-business solution. The Clearinghouse aims to provide publishers and producers with a more user-friendly interface which would incorporate new features to further reduce time delays and costs for both the publisher and the producer. The application will have separate modules which will allow them to customize the application to their needs and preferences. These new features could include client management systems, statistical data, reporting and a request management system.

This initiative is supported by the major publishers and multiple format producers in Canada. IELA has also been working with the Canadian Publishers Council (CPC) and the Association nationale des éditeurs de livres (ANEL) to encourage more publishers to join the initiative. The standard licence agreement between publishers and producers has been reviewed and updated to better reflect the interests of both these key groups.

The goal of the Clearinghouse is to increase the production of multiple formats and their timely availability to people with print disabilities.



Library Service Standards and Training

Consultations with librarians across the country clearly identified the critical importance of guidelines and training for library staff. In response to this need, and with advice from the CLA Working Group, IELA has been working to develop an online resource that will provide detailed guidelines to libraries on how to provide equitable library service to readers with print disabilities.

IELA is also working on a formal training package, accessible online, to be delivered across the country. IELA will be delivering a free accessibility service workshop at the CLA Conference in May, 2009.

Internet Portal

In conjunction with the clearinghouse, IELA is building a fully accessible Internet portal that will serve as a gateway for information and resources of interest to people with print disabilities. The portal will direct users to materials available in multiple formats.

Moving Forward

Change is essential if people with print disabilities are to enjoy the same level of choice that most Canadians take for granted when it comes to accessing print materials. This change will also give people with print disabilities a new level of hope that they can participate fully in the knowledge economy—a participation that will help our country grow as a free and democratic society.

The IELA strategy will reflect consultations with many Canadians, from people with disabilities and their representative organizations to members of Canada's library community, publishers, producers and others. Building on



core IELA initiatives, such as the Internet portal, service models, standards and training materials and the electronic clearinghouse, the strategy will be a major step forward for Canadians with print disabilities. It promises greater choice and library service similar to citizens who read conventional print.

The IELA strategy is ultimately about people. It is about partnerships and building awareness of the need to work together to make equitable library access in Canada a reality. It is a process of change that will help enrich the lives of millions of Canadians, offer real choice to people with print disabilities, and help them to achieve their full potential as individuals and as citizens.

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