Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project Phase 2 – Findings and Future Directions

Date: January 29, 2018

To: Toronto Public Library Board

From: City Librarian

**SUMMARY**

The purpose of this report is to present the results of Phase 2 of the Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project (February 1, 2017 – July 31, 2017) that has been successful in providing home internet service to low-income households previously without access, and to describe future directions.

The Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project is in support of and funded by the City’s Poverty Reduction Strategy to help address its objective of *increasing service access and availability*. Access to the internet and technology supports full participation in society, education, employment, government, and community, and is increasingly seen as a basic human right as more information and services are online.

Public libraries are important access points for technology and, for some people, the public library is their only access to the internet. Public libraries promote digital inclusion and digital literacy, including the safe use of the internet. For many families and households living in poverty, the prohibitively high cost of internet access has limited their ability to fully participate in society. While the Library provides free access to computers and Wi-Fi in all branches, this program provides home access to internet service for access outside of library hours to low-income households. The results of Phase 2 of the Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project indicate that providing free access to the internet has had a positive impact on the 158 participating households and their overall quality of life.

Additional City and private funding was provided in the 2017 budget, and Toronto Public Library expanded the program in September 2017 (Phase 3), offering the service at seven additional branches, as well as offering units through the Library’s team of Community Librarians and Mobile Library Services.

Further evaluation of this expanded service, including the development of a logic model and outcome measures, is planned for 2018.
**FINANCIAL IMPACT**

TPL received $0.100 million gross and net to support the City’s Poverty Reduction Initiatives as part of the Council-approved 2016 operating budget. In 2017, TPL received an additional $0.150 million gross and net from the City’s operating budget; bringing a total library operating budget of $0.250 million gross and net to support the Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project.

TPL has submitted further expansion of the Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project as a 2018 budget enhancement request, seeking an additional $0.300 million gross and net in operating funds, to bring the total to $0.550 million gross and net annually.

Toronto Public Library Foundation secured a total of $0.250 million from Google Canada in support of and expansion of this program. In addition to Google Canada’s support, Rogers has recently committed to donating Wi-Fi hotspot devices, at no cost to the Library with the Library’s commitment to two-year data plans for the devices.

TPL continues to seek third-party funding to support the ongoing Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project.

The Director, Finance & Treasurer has reviewed this financial impact and is in agreement with it.

**ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PLAN**

The Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project supports the Library’s 2016-2019 strategic plan priorities of breaking down barriers to access and driving inclusion, and expanding access to technology and training. There is a specific 2017 strategic work plan initiative to: *Expand Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project*.

Phase 3 of the project is identified as a 2018 strategic work plan initiative to: *Expand Wi-Fi hotspot lending program to 1000 devices available for loan to low income individuals in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas*, subject to a successful 2018 budget enhancement request and/or additional external donation support.

**EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

The Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project is a targeted library service initiative to help break down barriers to access, drive inclusion, and expand access to technology for socio-economically disadvantaged households, an identified equity-seeking group.
DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on December 12, 2016, the Library Board approved the 2017 strategic plan and directed staff to implement the initiatives, which included: **Expand Wi-Fi Hot Spot Lending program: Establish Internet Wi-Fi Hot Spot Lending program with lessons learned in the 2016 pilot program at three district branches and three neighbourhood branches; and expand program to additional locations (funding from the Poverty Reduction Strategy).**

On May 16, 2017, the Toronto Public Library Board received an information report providing findings of Phase 1 of the Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Pilot, as well as future directions for the project. A full copy of the report can be found at: [http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/pdfs/board/meetings/2017/may15/22-wi-fi-hotspot-lending-pilot-update.pdf](http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/pdfs/board/meetings/2017/may15/22-wi-fi-hotspot-lending-pilot-update.pdf)


As a result, phase 3 launched on September 4, 2017 and is scheduled to end on March 5, 2018.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

In 2015, the Toronto Public Library Foundation was approached by Google Canada about the possibility of implementing a Wi-Fi hotspot borrowing service. In addition to a donation from Google Canada, TPL also received funding from the City of Toronto as part of their Poverty Reduction Strategy, and through the Library’s operating budget.

The Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project is one of four initiatives in support of and funded by the City’s Poverty Reduction Strategy to help address its objective of increasing service access and availability. Access to the internet and technology supports full participation in society, education, employment, government, and community and is increasingly seen as a basic human right as more information and services are online. Public libraries are important access points for technology and, for some people, the public library is their only access to the internet. Public libraries promote digital inclusion and digital literacy including the safe use of the internet. While the Library provides free access to computers and Wi-Fi in all branches, this project provides home access to internet service for access outside of library hours to low-income households.

In partnership with the City, Google Canada and Rogers, TPL now offers Wi-Fi hotspot lending in high needs areas of the City to address an immediate need. The Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project is offered in branches serving communities with a large number of low-
income households. The program is part of TPL’s strategy to expand access to technology and digital literacy training across the City.

It was decided that a pilot study approach would allow TPL to test how the service could be operated and ensure that it was being made available to those who needed it the most. The Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project was set up as a year-long pilot study offered in two six-month phases. Phase 1 launched on June 1, 2016 and ended on November 30, 2016 and Phase 2 launched on February 1, 2017 and ended on July 31, 2017.

COMMENTS

Phase 2 Results
Phase 2 of the Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Project was launched on February 1, 2017 and ended on July 31, 2017. All of the branches selected for Phase 1 were included for Phase 2. These included Albion District, Cedarbrae District, Evelyn Gregory, Parliament Street and York Woods District. Thoncliffe Park Branch did not continue in Phase 2, however, as many families served by the branch indicated they already had subsidized home internet access. All of the 158 hotspots allocated for Phase 2 of the program were loaned out. A small number of additional devices were kept in reserve to replace potentially malfunctioning units, as informed by experience in Phase 1.

Participating branches, with help from community agencies, recruited participants that met the borrowing profile, that is, low-income households without internet access.

Results from Phase 2 illustrate that the project continues to be successful in extending internet service to low-income households previously without access. 64% of participants reported that their annual household income was below $30,000. The high cost of internet connectivity was clearly identified as a significant barrier with 83% of participants responding that it was the reason they did not have access at home.

Survey results indicate that a high proportion of respondents used the hotspot for education and employment-related purposes. When asked whether having the hotspot helped them achieve their goals, 62% of respondents indicated that it helped with educational goals and 39% with employment goals.

Highlights
• 99% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Program:
  • 71% of respondents indicated that the hotspot was primarily used at home;
  • 80% of respondents identified education as one of the key uses of the hotspots;
  • 72% of respondents responded that they had used the hotspot every day;
  • 38% of respondents used a smartphone as the main device to connect to the hotspot.

Participant Feedback
Participants were asked to share how no longer having access to high-speed internet at home would affect individuals in their household. Below are some of their responses.
“My husband wouldn’t be able to join his online classes. My daughter wouldn’t be able to learn online drawing. My son wouldn’t be able to play games and learn his tales. And I wouldn’t be able to watch cooking shows, search about health issues and many more.”

“My children will not be able to access tutorials, educational shows, documentaries or watch movies online. It wouldn’t be as entertaining or educational without it.”

“My kids used it every day. It was such a great help to my household seeing I am a single mother of 3 kids and it help me a lot with saving money.”

“The household would greatly miss Wi-Fi because we use so much internet we use it for almost everything my children for school as well as entertainment. So the loss will be greatly felt.”

“Not having access to the world and being closed in. Not good. We use google to find current events.”

“Not having high-speed internet could be a drag because if surfing the web, the pages take much longer to load. Also, if more than one person is connected to a slow service, it could become significantly slower. While slower internet may be cheaper, the disadvantage of the speed would still affect the users.”

“I'm new here and this Wi-Fi helped me to search for jobs and research a lot online. It was very helpful and I appreciate and god to bless the giver of this Wi-Fi.”

**Phase 3 and Beyond**

Phase 3 of the expanded program began on September 4, 2017. A total of 570 new devices were provided by Rogers as part of a new service contract, which includes free devices with a two-year unlimited data plan, and ensures delivery of the service over the next two years. An additional 50 devices from Phase 2 have also been activated for Phase 3, providing over 600 devices for the current phase of the program. Distribution of devices remains focused on low-income families living in high-needs areas, and has been expanded to include seven additional branches, as well as the Community Librarian Project and Bookmobile stops in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas. Phase 3 is scheduled to end March 5, 2018.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Phases</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Participating Households</th>
<th>Distribution Branches and Locations</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>June 1, 2016 to November 30, 2016</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>Albion, Cedarbrae, Evelyn Gregory, Parliament Street, Thorncliffe and York Woods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>February 1, 2017 to July 31, 2017</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>Albion, Cedarbrae, Evelyn Gregory, Parliament Street, and York Woods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>September 4, 2017 to March 5, 2018</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>Albert Campbell, Albion, Barbara Frum, Cedarbrae, Downsview, Evelyn Gregory, Malvern, Mount Dennis, Parkdale, Parliament Street, Richview, and York Woods as well as bookmobile stops in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas and via TPL’s Community Librarians that work in Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) locations.</td>
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Further evaluation of this expanded service is planned, including the development of a logic model and outcome measures.

There are also ongoing discussions related to piloting new, complementary services, including the loaning of devices (such as laptops, tablets, etc.) to complement the hotspot lending program. Findings from Phases 1 and 2 illustrate there is a clear need for these types of services, that align with the Library’s strategic priorities of expanding access, increasing opportunity, and building connections.

**CONTACT**

Pam Ryan; Director, Service Development and Innovation; Tel.: 416-393-7133; Email: pryan@torontopubliclibrary.ca

**SIGNATURE**

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Vickery Bowles
City Librarian