

## Canadian Library Association Dismayed at Cancellation of Community Access Program

### -FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE-

OTTAWA (April 12, 2012) The Canadian Library Association (CLA) believes that all Canadians, regardless of economic status or location, should have the ability to access information and services through broadband connection to the Internet, and should be able to access the assistance they need to become digitally literate. For many Canadians, especially those in remote and rural locations, this access has been provided since 1994 by the Community Access Program (CAP) funded by Industry Canada.

CLA is dismayed at the cancellation of this program announced by the federal government on April 5, 2012. According to Industry Canada, the program has “outlived its usefulness” because 94% of Canadians now live in a community where broadband is available for purchase. Industry Canada is consequently planning on relying more on private-sector household access than government-funded public access. But with only 79% of Canadian households having an Internet connection, and 54% of households in the lowest income quartile, it is clear that community-based Internet access is needed to supplement home access.

Industry Canada’s own Internal Audit from 2010 acknowledges that “the digital divide continues to persist in Canada among a number of demographic groups including Canadians in rural and remote communities, low income earners, those with low levels of literacy and education, francophones over 50 years of age, seniors and others.” This is especially true of the homeless and those in unstable housing in communities such as Vancouver’s Downtown East Side.

CLA President Karen Adams stated: “CAP programs provide much more than connected computers—they provide training and help to the public to increase their digital literacy. Without this assistance, disadvantaged groups would not be able to benefit from the ability to connect with information and services essential to their well-being, including online banking, tax compliance and benefits, connecting with their families, and remote health services.” Adams indicated that CAP programs provide a place for people to connect with the help they need to start them on their journey towards online independence, an essential skill in today’s increasingly digital economy.

The continued need for CAP programs is borne out by use: at sites across Canada, indications are that use of the computers, as well as requests for assistance, have been constant or are increasing. CAP operators report that many of the most remote sites serve as community gathering and sharing spaces where there are no others, and that public libraries depend on CAP sites to deliver their services remotely.

Public libraries, which provide Internet access as part of CAP or on their own, are also seeing considerable demand for their services, and would be unable to fund the shortfall resulting from the CAP program cut. In Nova Scotia, for example, almost half of the 209 CAP sites would likely have to shut down. Across the country, municipal and county governments, already squeezed by increasing costs and diminishing revenues, would struggle to fund existing sites from library and social services budgets. In that way, this cut represents a form of local government downloading, an irony when one considers that local access to government services provided by CAP was one of the ways the federal government was able to save much larger amounts of money by transferring services from in-person to online.

CLA therefore calls on the Federal Government to rethink this strategy, and re-imagine CAP as part of a policy mix focused on bringing the benefits of broadband connection to all Canadians, thereby helping each citizen play a meaningful part in Canada's economic future.

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*CLA is Canada's largest national library association, representing the interests of public, academic, school and special libraries, professional librarians, library workers, library trustees, and all those concerned with enhancing the quality of life of Canadians through access to knowledge, literacy and lifelong learning.*

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