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Public funding for accessible library service is needed now

Dear editor:

With a provincial election on the horizon, Ontarians with print disabilities are reminding candidates that everyone has a right to read. Given that less than 10 per cent of published material in Canada is available in alternative formats, improving access to accessible reading material is a key concern for approximately 1 million Ontarians who cannot read traditional print.

For 560,000 Ontarians who are blind or partially sighted, this means formats such as braille, audio CDs with built-in accessibility features, and digital formats that can be read using special computer technology.

?For nearly a century, people who read print have enjoyed access to public libraries funded through tax dollars. For the same amount of time, people with vision loss have relied on the CNIB Library ? a charitable entity that operates on private and public donations to deliver accessible reading material to those whose needs are not met by the public library system,? says Len Baker, Executive Director & Regional Vice President, CNIB Ontario-Nunavut. ?Equal access to accessible reading material is a basic right of citizenship and no one should have to depend on a charity to receive that service.?

CNIB has partnered with the Canadian Urban Libraries Council to ensure Ontarians with print disabilities have access to alternative format print materials through their local public libraries, but immediate government funding is needed to ensure these vital services remain available for everyone who needs them. For Julia Janzen, 12, access to reading material in alternative formats helps increase her braille literacy. It will also encourage life-long learning and provide opportunities for employment and community engagement in her future.

?I love to read stories with my brothers and sister. For clothes, I have these drawers that have braille on them that say the days of the week and my mom puts clothes in them so I can get dressed on my own,? says Julia. ?I have to do some things differently than my classmates; everything I have is in braille.?

?The CNIB Library is a one-of-a-kind treasure that has been subsidized as part of our charitable work, but producing books in accessible formats and operating a library with sophisticated infrastructure and expert staff is costly. In many industrialized countries, including the United States, Sweden and Denmark, these costs are covered by government. They should be in Canada, too,? says Baker.

Julia is encouraging voters to connect with candidates in their riding to champion everyone's right to read.

To learn more, visit cnib.ca

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