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**Ontario Library Association (OLA) 2024 Super Conference
January 24-27, 2024, Toronto, Ontario
Trustee Rawlson King**

The Ontario Library Association's 2024 Super Conference was held January 24-27, 2024, at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre and the InterContinental Centre Hotel in Toronto, ON. I attended the conference on behalf of the Ottawa Public Library Board from January 25 to January 27.

Founded in 1900, the Ontario Library Association (OLA) is the oldest continually operating non-profit library association in Canada. With more than 4,000 members, the OLA is the largest library association in the country. The organization provides the chance for library staff and supporters to share experience and expertise while creating innovative solutions in a constantly changing environment. OLA offers opportunities for learning, networking, recognizing, influencing, and celebrating within the library sector.

According to the OLA, the conference gathered an audience of 4,200 library professionals, educators, and industry experts. The four-day event featured a diverse range of educational sessions, networking opportunities, and access to Canada's largest library trade show featuring over 150 exhibitors. The trade show, located in the North Hall of the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, featured many publishers who offered attendees opportunities to meet authors from many diverse communities and obtain advanced reader copies of new books, many of which focused on subject matter for young adults. The trade show also featured poster sessions with presentations from academics and library professionals, especially on the theme of artificial intelligence.

This year's conference theme, "Get Loud", emphasized the pivotal role of libraries in promoting equity, diversity, and truth in society. The conference was an opportunity for library champions and community partners not only reflect but to amplify the enduring value and genuine contributions of libraries to equitable, just, healthy, and resilient societies. Attendees were encouraged to reaffirm their commitment to professional values and embrace libraries as platforms for diverse voices and ideas.

The overarching emphasis of the OLA's event was the restoration of social normalcy post-pandemic. Julie S. Lalonde, an internationally recognized women's rights advocate based in Ottawa, delivered a compelling keynote address, reflecting on her advocacy journey focused on empowering women and engaging bystanders. She noted that even before the pandemic there had been a marked increase in incivility and a marked decrease in emotional intelligence and empathy. The pandemic exacerbated this trend due to more people being stressed and traumatized from "social isolation" during the pandemic. This situation, in conjunction with erosion of basic public services, have put more stress on library services, solutions and staff. Consequently, she noted it will be important for libraries to continue to focus on creating safe spaces in libraries and train staff concerning bystander intervention, de-escalation, self-defense and the establishment of peer support networks.

On the theme of post-pandemic recovery, Eric Klinenberg, an American socialist and urban scholar based at New York University, discussed the need for "social solidarity" after society's experience with "social isolation" during the event's closing keynote address. Social solidarity is defined as the interdependence between individuals and across groups. Klinenberg described it as an essential tool for combating collective threats. Solidarity motivates us as a society to promote the public good, not just our own private interests or personal security. To effectively promote social solidarity, communities require strong institutions and social infrastructure. Klinenberg identified public libraries as an important locus for social solidarity in free and democratic societies.

Major areas of focus for the conference included intellectual freedom, equity and inclusion and the emergence of artificial intelligence.

During many sessions, the OLA emphasized the responsibility of libraries to represent all perspectives, challenge any form of censorship, foster free expression, be welcoming places and offer supportive conditions for expressions of knowledge, ideas, and opinions. Protecting intellectual freedom in Canadian libraries was defined as fundamental to the democratic value of free expression through guaranteeing free access to information. Libraries serve as vital hubs for education, research, and community engagement, offering individuals the opportunity to explore a wide range of perspectives and ideas without censorship or restriction. By safeguarding intellectual

freedom, libraries in Canada foster an environment where individuals can freely seek knowledge, challenge prevailing beliefs, and engage in critical inquiry, thereby promoting intellectual growth, cultural enrichment, and democratic participation within society. Upholding intellectual freedom ensures that libraries remain vibrant spaces that reflect the diverse voices and experiences of Canadian communities while also preserving the principles of democracy and civil liberties.

Conference sessions also focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, which lie at the heart of many libraries' missions to serve diverse communities and bridge societal divides. Many sessions focused on how libraries across Ontario are striving to create welcoming spaces where individuals from all backgrounds feel represented, respected, and empowered to engage with information and resources. Library professionals at the 2024 Super Conference discussed how their respective commitments to equity and inclusion are reflected in initiatives aimed at addressing systemic barriers, promoting cultural diversity, and amplifying marginalized voices within library collections and programming. The interactive discussions did note however that despite efforts to promote equity and inclusion, libraries continue to face persistent challenges related to accessibility, representation, and cultural sensitivity. Socioeconomic disparities, language barriers, and geographic isolation limit access to library services for marginalized communities, exacerbating social inequalities. Libraries must adopt inclusive practices, such as offering multilingual resources, implementing accessibility features, and engaging in community outreach initiatives, to ensure equitable access to information and services for all residents.

A major emerging theme of the 2024 Super Conference also focused on the impact of artificial intelligence. The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) presents both opportunities and ethical dilemmas for libraries in Canada. AI technologies offer innovative solutions for information retrieval, cataloging, and user engagement, enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of library services. From recommendation algorithms to chatbots, AI-powered tools enable libraries to personalize user experiences, streamline administrative tasks, and anticipate evolving information needs. However, discussions during event sessions found that the potential of widespread adoption of AI in Canadian libraries could raise concerns regarding data privacy, algorithmic bias, and technological dependence. AI systems may also perpetuate existing inequalities by amplifying biases present in training data or algorithms, leading to unequal access to information and reinforcing systemic

discrimination. Moreover, the collection and analysis of user data by AI-driven platforms raise ethical questions about surveillance, consent, and intellectual privacy.

Sessions I attended that focused upon these themes included:

“Making a Statement”

This session highlighted the importance of intellectual freedom statements endorsed by libraries, emphasizing their role in navigating contemporary challenges. Discussions focused on the internal and external processes involved in creating and implementing such statements at both the Ottawa Public Library and the Toronto Public Library. Alexandra Yarrow must be commended for her insightful presentation concerning OPL’s intellectual freedom policies.

“Improving AI Literacy in our Communities”

Delving into the significance of AI literacy, this presentation explored strategies for enhancing community understanding of artificial intelligence ethically and effectively. Attendees engaged in conversations aimed at refining the concept of AI literacy within library communities.

“Between the Lines: the Public Libraries’ Role in Championing Intellectual Freedom and Resisting Censorship”

This session underscored the evolving landscape of intellectual freedom within public libraries, specifically addressing censorship challenges. Attendees gained insights into trends across Canada and explored resources offered by the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) Intellectual Freedom Committee.

“WTF is AI and Why Do Libraries Need It?”

This session delved into the integration of artificial intelligence in libraries, emphasizing its potential to revolutionize various facets of library services. Attendees examined the ethical considerations and challenges associated with AI adoption.

“What’s Up, LAC”

This session provided an overview of programming and services provided by Library and Archives Canada (LAC) and described some of the key challenges faced by the Canadian library community. Lesile Weir, Librarian and Archivist of Canada, described new innovative programming such as the book launch for Cree artist Kent Monkman and his long-time collaborator Gisèle Gordon that LAC presented in conjunction with the

Ottawa International Writers Festival and Ottawa Public Library. LAC staff also discussed their collaboration with Ottawa Public Library concerning the Ādisōke project.

“Public Libraries Spotlight: Samanta Krishnapillai”

Samanta Krishnapillai, Founder, Editor-in-Chief and Managing Director of On Canada Project Inc. led an informative session about addressing issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in libraries. She described how libraries can work with members of the Millennial and Gen Z generation to bridge information gaps and help information dissemination to marginalized and younger people through the power of conversation in order to drive public awareness and understanding of critical issues.

“Censorship in Canadian Libraries: What We Know, What We Don't Know (Yet)”

Libraries across Canada are confronting an unprecedented surge in materials challenges, censorship endeavors, and intellectual freedom quandaries. However, the narrative surrounding library censorship unfolds differently contingent upon the demographic composition of a library's community. In this session, Heather Hill, a Professor at the Western University Faculty of Information & Media Studies, and Michael Nyby, Vice-Chair of the CFLA Intellectual Freedom Committee, delved into the diverse manifestations of intellectual freedom challenges libraries in Canada have encountered over the past eight years, along with evolving trends. They also explored the complexities associated with gathering data on library censorship, affirming the likelihood that the estimate from the American Library Association (ALA) suggesting that between 82-97 percent of challenges remain unreported is similarly applicable in Canada.

Library Trustee Boot Camp

I was extremely pleased to have had the opportunity to attend the Library Trustee Boot Camp on January 27, which was held at InterContinental Centre Hotel. Over 150 people attended from municipalities across Ontario. The event provided library board trustees an opportunity to network, as well as to have focused conversations about risk management, advocacy and government relations and strengthening the relationship between library boards and municipal governments.

The opening session was designed specifically to enhance team building and communication skills. Matt Thompson of Teamcraft, a management consultancy, led a session of "courageous conversations" that focused on sharing ideas concerning better

ways to work and communicate together to develop methodologies of collaborative leadership. He focused on the requirements for healthy, high performing teams, which included using project charters to solidify collective team purpose based upon reflective practice. At the end of the session, he provided board trustees with information to enhance our ability to facilitate open discussions, foster a culture of inclusivity, and effectively address board-related challenges.

The following session focused on risk management and posed the following questions for discussion:

1. *What are the most pressing concerns to either you as Library Board Members (trustees) or to your library?*
2. *What do you see as some of the successes of your library board?*
3. *How does your board advocate to the city, and to the broader community?*
4. *What policies / strategies do you have in place for safety and security to meet the social needs of your community? Which of these strategies have had the greatest impact?*

The exercise demonstrated to me that the working relationships that the Ottawa Public Library Board has with the community and amongst its individual Board members are excellent, in comparison to the challenges that other library boards in Ontario face.

The Boot Camp further featured a session concerning advocacy and government relations. The session focused on a library board in Western Canada that experienced a loss of community confidence and political support from municipal leaders which resulted in the cancellation of a library expansion project, as well as a multi-year reduction in operation revenue from the municipality. The session emphasized that advocacy is all about building relationships, knowing your audience, finding champions, and aligning fiscal goals with the municipality. This session provides validation that the Ottawa Public Library Board and the library's management team has an excellent working relationship with City government and other local stakeholders in comparison to some of our peers, especially in terms of our shared vision and philosophy.

In sum, the 2024 OLA Super Conference served as a vibrant platform for librarians and professionals to engage in meaningful discussions, explore emerging trends, and reaffirm their commitment to advancing library values. With a diverse array of

presentations and keynote sessions, I had the impression that attendees left empowered and inspired to embrace the challenges and opportunities ahead, echoing the theme of "Get Loud" in their professional endeavors. The conference reinforced the pivotal role of libraries as catalysts for social change and advocates for intellectual freedom and equity and diversity in an ever-evolving landscape.

As an Ottawa Public Library Board Trustee, I appreciated the opportunity to attend this event to better understand issues facing other libraries and learn from fellow library board trustees from across Ontario. I also appreciated the approach of this conference, which featured and favored more inclusive conversations with library sector peers, alongside research sessions and keynote plenaries.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to both Julie Tremblay (Library Board Assistant, Board and Strategic Services) and Alexandra Yarrow (Program Manager, Board and Strategy Services) for their assistance with all the administrative and logistical supports required for this conference. While I did not have an opportunity to attend a session featuring Kaya Fraser (Portfolio Manager, Service Design) due to overlapping sessions, which would constitute my only major criticism of this event, I would also like to thank her for her participation and contribution to a session focused on creating welcoming library spaces at the 2024 Super Conference.