

Report to / Rapport au:

**Ottawa Public Library Board
Conseil d'administration de la Bibliothèque publique d'Ottawa**

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File Number: OPLB-2019-0801

SUBJECT: WiFi Hotspot Lending Pilot – Update

OBJET: Projet pilote de prêt de bornes Wi-Fi – Mise à jour

REPORT RECOMMENDATION

That the Ottawa Public Library Board receive this report for information.

RECOMMANDATION DU RAPPORT

Que le Conseil d'administration de la Bibliothèque publique d'Ottawa prenne connaissance de ce rapport à titre d'information.

BACKGROUND

In accordance with the Public Libraries Act, RSO 1990, c.P.44, the Ottawa Public Library Board (the Board) has accountability for the full range of decisions affecting the organization. The Board uses a model that focuses Trustee attention on strategic elements, while delegating general supervision and operational direction to the CEO. Further, in accordance with Board policy OPLB-002 Delegation of Authority (DOA) item #14, the Board is responsible to “set or change fees for services.”

On May 8, 2018, the Board received a report (OPLB-2018-0502) outlining a pilot to lend WiFi hotspots to customers and approved a recommendation to waive associated late

fees until December 31, 2018, the end of the pilot period. The pilot was regarded as a means to reduce the digital divide in Ottawa by providing access to the internet to customers who were without such access for various socio-economic reasons.

The purpose of this report is to advise the Board on the outcome of the pilot and to close out the initiative.

DISCUSSION

Public libraries have an important role in promoting digital inclusion by providing access to the internet via public PCs and WiFi in branches. WiFi hotspot lending furthers this core service by allowing customers to “borrow the internet,” thereby increasing digital access to customers.

From June 2018 to April 2019, Ottawa Public Library (OPL) administered a WiFi lending pilot, allowing customers who self-declared as not having internet at home to borrow one of 72 kits, comprised of a WiFi hotspot device and Chromebook, for a period of three-months. The hotspot kits were loaned out of six locations in areas where, according to Environics Analytics, one in 10 households does not have access to the internet at home: Alta Vista, Rideau, Rosemount, and St-Laurent branches as well as the Caldwell and Lincoln Heights Bookmobile stops. Evaluation criteria included: pre-loan and post-loan surveys to evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot, data usage, circulation patterns, device loss rate, and staff resources requirements.

The pilot, as described in the May 2018 report, called for partner organizations to identify people who would benefit from this program. This model did not generate enough loans due to low number of referrals from partners (19 loans only). Therefore, within four months of launching, the pilot, while still offered at the same locations, was opened to any OPL customer who self-declared not having internet at home. Staff were encouraged to promote the hotspots to customers who they thought might benefit from them, either in-branch or when doing outreach and community development work with groups or partners in their service area. As a result of the change in scope, the pilot period was extended past the original end date, until March 31, 2019, to collect additional data from this new set of customers. Due to the legislative timelines for the appointment of the 2019-2022 Board, no update was provided, and fees continued to be waived during this period.

Once borrowing was opened to walk-in customers, the kits experienced high demand in the four identified branches, even though no advertising was done. Demand via

bookmobile stops remained low. Branches not part of the pilot reported interest from customers who had heard about the project by word of mouth. During the 10-month pilot period, the 72 kits were borrowed on 169 occasions by unique customers (out of a maximum of 216 loans), corresponding to an 80% check out rate.

Customer feedback was collected as part of the evaluation process. Customers who borrowed a kit were very appreciative of the program and the long loan period. The post loan survey was completed by 30 participants, representing 18% of loans. Survey results informed OPL about the importance of the kits for studying, as well as staying connected and accessing information. One individual reported having achieved an employment-related goal via the hotspot kit. Most customers who responded to the post-loan survey used the hotspot daily.

Challenges were encountered during the pilot. The loss rate was higher than expected: 13 of the 72 kits were lost or damaged, which represented 18% of those in circulation. As well, staff were not able to validate the information provided by customers in terms of home internet access; this prevented OPL's ability to measure the primary goal of the project to increase digital inclusion. The number of kits borrowed from Bookmobile stops (12 loans) was significantly lower than the number borrowed from branches (157 loans). Anecdotally, customers did not want to take on the responsibility of borrowing the units at those two stops due to possible loss or theft, and associated liability.

At the end of the extended pilot period, public WiFi lending ceased at all locations and remaining kits were recalled. In light of the challenges experienced during the pilot (loss rate, theft, etc.) and the high cost of operationalizing the program beyond a limited number of locations, staff concluded that direct lending to customers who self-declare not having internet at home was not the best approach to meeting the original goal. As such, there are no plans to resume direct public WiFi lending service to customers.

Because of the important role of public libraries in providing access to information, staff are exploring other means of increasing digital access using WiFi kits. One approach may involve a partnership with homework clubs across the city in order to lend to students without internet access at home, considering the recent provincial decision to increase the number of distance education credits for high school students.

Staff will continue to explore other operational approaches to making the kits available. No further reports will come to the Board unless required as per the DOA.

CONSULTATION

Survey input was collected from customers borrowing the WiFi hotspot kits. Input was also collected from OPL staff and management team.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no legal implications associated with this report.

RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

There are no risk management implications associated with this report.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications associated with this report. Existing equipment will be used for any future initiatives, and associated data charges are covered under existing operating budgets.

ACCESSIBILITY IMPACTS

There are no accessibility impacts associated with this report.

TECHNOLOGY IMPLICATIONS

Technological implications have been considered in the development of this report, specifically regarding data plans, policies and procedures, and lending parameters.

BOARD PRIORITIES

This report aligns with the OPL values of Access & Inclusion, Informed Community, and Innovation, along with the Strategic Direction to strengthen and promote the Library's reach and value, specifically, to align Library services in support of community needs.

DISPOSITION

Staff will continue to explore means to increase digital inclusion and provide equitable access to the internet. Decisions requiring Board approval will be brought forward as per Board Policy 002-OPLB, Delegation of Authority.