

Politics

Advocates urge Liberals to cancel 'devastating' cut to services for Canadians with print reading disabilities

\$4 million cut comes as shock to those who rely on services to curb isolation during pandemic

[Richard Raycraft](#) · CBC News · Posted: Mar 07, 2021 4:00 AM ET | Last Updated: March 7



Kim Kilpatrick of Ottawa has been blind since birth and reads primarily in braille. She said she's shocked the federal government is cutting funding to two organizations that distribute accessible reading materials. (Joan Anderson/SUPPLIED)

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Advocates for Canadians with disabilities related to reading printed text have launched a protest campaign after the federal government abruptly announced it would cut their funding — a surprise move they say will be "devastating" in the middle of a pandemic.

Print disabilities include any condition which negatively affects someone's ability to read traditional print materials. Such conditions include blindness, dyslexia, Parkinson's and cerebral palsy.

According to the Liberal government's 2020 Fall Economic Statement, funding for the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA) and the National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS) is being phased out over four years from the current level of \$4 million. Funding for both services is to be eliminated by the 2024-25 fiscal year.

Labour Markets, Health, Safety and Economic Prosperity of Canadians	4	3	3	2	1	1
Modernizing the National Arts Centre's Digital Infrastructure	0	0	1	1	1	1
The National Arts Centre's back office systems — including its financial, ticketing, and phone systems — have become severely outdated. This measure will support the updating of these systems and position the NAC to continue delivering world-class artistic performances and customer service to Canadians once the pandemic has concluded.						
Alternative Format Materials	4	3	2	1	0	0
Funding for the Centre for Equitable Library Access and the National Network for Equitable Library Service to support the transition towards industry-based production and distribution of accessible reading materials to Canadians with print disabilities.						

The proposed allocation of funding from the 2020 Fall Economic Statement, which shows federal funding for CELA and NNELS reduced to zero by the 2024-25 fiscal year. (Government of Canada)

"It felt like a bit of a punch in the gut. We know that the federal government has said to us that they feel this work is important," said Kevin Millsip, executive director of the B.C. Libraries Cooperative, the parent organization for NNELS.

Millsip said that while NNELS does get a small amount of money from provincial and territorial governments, the federal government provides most of its public funding. Federal funding cuts would force the organization to lay off staff, many of whom have visual impairments, he said.

Both CELA and NNELS use federal funds to curate and distribute accessible books, such as braille and audio books. CELA provides access to a collection of almost 900,000 titles.

The two organizations have received the funding from the federal government for the past four years.



Kaden Faris, an accessibility tester with NNELS, conducts a demonstration at the 2019 Annual Accessibility Summit in Toronto organized by NNELS. NNELS uses some of its \$1 million in federal funding to put on the event. (NNELS/SUPPLIED)

Kim Kilpatrick has been blind since birth and reads primarily by braille. She said she was surprised by the timing of the planned cut.

"I was really, really surprised that this is the time they'd choose to cut something which is helping us get through this isolation and COVID," she said. "We think about all of the money that we're spending around this time — this is sort of a drop in the bucket."

The organizations said the federal government never warned them that the cut was coming. Now, they're worried about having to dramatically reduce their production of accessible

reading material.



"This will have a devastating impact on our users. People with disabilities are already disproportionately affected, particularly with the pandemic right now," said Laurie Davidson, CELA's executive director.

"So certainly now is not the time to do the cuts. But on an ongoing basis, this is essential work to make sure that everyone has equitable access to reading."

"Our government recognized that in order to find a long term solution to the problem of making published materials accessible to people with print disabilities, we needed to bring partners from different sectors to the table," said Marielle Hossack, a spokesperson for Employment Minister Carla Qualtrough.

"The Fall Economic Statement signalled our continued commitment to embrace the potential of new technology and production practices that are inclusive from the start. By supporting a wide range of initiatives that address social issues and barriers that confront persons with disabilities, we can offer greater support and have a long-lasting impact on the production and distribution industry.

"With all this in mind, we know the pandemic has created real challenges for this transition in publishing. We are committed to continue working with the disability community every step of the way to find the right solutions."

Opposition responds to cut

Both CELA and NNELS have reached out to sympathetic ears in the opposition parties.

"We'll do everything that we can to ensure that [the government] understands that this is the wrong decision, and that they need to ensure that this funding remains," said Raquel Dancho, Conservative critic for future workforce development and disability inclusion.

"I urge Qualtrough to change her mind on this and support Canadians who have visual impairments."

Daniel Blaikie, NDP critic for future workforce development and disability inclusion, said he plans to write to the government about the issue.

"It seems to me that these organizations have been reliably providing an important service," Blaikie told CBC News.

"The amount of money they need to do that is a drop in the bucket when we talk about the overall federal budget, and they've spent a number of years developing the capacity and the skills in order to deliver this. It seems a shame that they'd be winding that work up when Canadians with visual impairments continue to need accessible materials in order to be able to do any number of things."

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CELA and NNELS estimate that fewer than one in 10 books available in Canada are in an accessible format. They also estimate that around three million Canadians have a print disability — a number Millsip said will grow as the population continues to age.

The fall economic statement says the funding is meant to be a "transition" toward "industry-based production and distribution" of accessible reading materials — meaning the government is hoping the private publishing industry will pick up the work being done by CELA and NNELS now.

But Davidson and Millsip said they don't believe that's a solution to the lack of accessible reading material in Canada.

"Industry will not be able to fill the gap," Davidson said.

She said that while publishers have made strides in producing accessible versions of books, they still don't do it for most titles — and when they do, they tend to opt for audio books instead of braille.

"Braille has a smaller user base, and yet is very important to people who are blind and read by braille," Davidson said.

Cathy McMillan, the founding director of Dyslexia B.C., said she believes the funding cuts will damage an industry that is already underfunded.





Cathy McMillan of Port Moody, B.C. and her two daughters have dyslexia. She said Canada has lagged behind the U.S. when it comes to providing accessible reading materials. (Cathy McMillan/SUPPLIED)

McMillan and both of her daughters are dyslexic. She said that when it comes to providing accessible reading options for people with print disabilities, Canada has lagged behind the United States.

"[My daughter's] whole high school existence, we were gearing up for her to go to the U.S., because access to materials like that was better," McMillan said.

"It's pretty sad that Canada isn't great for access to print materials for people with print disabilities, and they're effectively going to make it worse."

Millsip said he believes the government can afford to backtrack on the planned cut.

"It's been clear to us throughout this pandemic that when there's a will, there's a way. And what we're saying to the federal government is, 'Find the will, and make the way, to restore this funding,'" he said.

"Why would you make cuts to this community, at this time? There's no logic there."