



Braille Literacy Canada calls upon the federal government to continue supporting access to books for blind Canadians

March 11, 2021 – Braille Literacy Canada, the Canadian braille authority, decries the federal government’s decision to phase out funding for the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA) and the National Network for Equitable Library Services (NNELS).

CELA and NNELS provide free access to braille and audio-recorded books and magazines for the more than 3 million Canadians who are blind, partially sighted or deafblind or who face other print disabilities. CELA and NNELS collectively receive \$4 million annually to produce braille and audio materials and circulate them to patrons (directly and through the public library system). The federal government has announced its intention to reduce that funding to \$0 within the next few years.

“Braille is vital for education, employment, and social inclusion – as vital as print is for the sighted,” says Natalie Martiniello, President of Braille Literacy Canada. “While publishers should do more to provide accessible content right off the presses, this does not diminish the importance of CELA and NNELS which produce and house specialized formats, including physical braille books, and distribute them to patrons across the country. Without the specialized services provided through CELA and NNELS, patrons with print disabilities will have fewer choices of format, and reduced access to physical braille.”

Anthony Tibbs, a class action lawyer with Merchant Law Group, adds, “The decision to abandon CELA and NNELS seems at odds with Canada’s public commitment to accessibility and inclusion with the recent adoption of the *Accessible Canada Act*, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, and the *Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind or Who Otherwise Cannot Read Print*. Ceasing production of accessible materials runs counter to the spirit of the *Marrakesh Treaty*.”

Fewer than 10% of books published in Canada are made available in accessible formats for people with print disabilities. Only a very small proportion of published works are recorded commercially as audio books, and no mainstream publishers produce braille which requires specialized expertise and equipment.

Cutting production funding to NNELS and CELA will further reduce access to reading materials, widening the gap for services and compounding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is having a disproportionate impact on Canadians with disabilities.

Braille Literacy Canada calls on the federal government to reinstate and expand the funding to ensure that these accessible services remain available on an indefinite basis.

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Braille Literacy Canada / Litt ratie braille Canada, founded in 1990 as the Canadian Braille Authority, is a national charitable organization led by a volunteer board of directors dedicated to the promotion of braille as the primary medium of literacy for those who are blind or who have vision loss. BLC is recognized by the International Council on English Braille as the authority for the development, adoption, and establishment of standards relating to braille in Canada. BLC represents those working with or impacted by braille, with a membership comprising organizations, researchers, educators, braille transcribers, braille producers, parents of braille users and braille users themselves.

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