

Consumer Health Information Service – Loss of Operating Funding

Date:	April 20, 2009
To:	Toronto Public Library Board
From:	City Librarian

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to provide the Board with notice of the loss of operating funding for the Consumer Health Information Services (CHIS) from the Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion (MHP). On March 30, 2009, staff received verbal notice from the MHP that funding for CHIS would not be extended beyond the current agreement that was to expire on March 31, 2009. From its inception, CHIS was envisioned as a provincial service with provincial funding. TPL provided some in-kind support and as the service operated out of the Toronto Reference Library, CHIS was able to provide a specialized information service to local Toronto users.

The MHP's reduced budget resources and a decision to focus its priorities on working with health promoters led to this decision to end funding to CHIS. Library staff is in the process of developing a transition funding agreement with the MHP and will be developing a detailed plan for closing down the provincial service.

TPL does not have the resources to operate a stand-alone consumer health information service. However, with the discontinuation of the provincial CHIS service, staff will develop a detailed plan to close the provincial service and develop a plan that will migrate the provision of consumer health information to local users in a more integrated fashion within the Toronto Reference Library.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

Provided that the CHIS service can be closed within the negotiated time and available transition funding from the province, there is no net impact on the Library's 2009 operating budget. Grant and transition revenue received in 2009 would cover CHIS operating expenses for the period of its operation in 2009.

The Director, Finance & Treasurer has reviewed this Financial Impact Statement and is in agreement with it.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

CHIS is a standalone consumer health information and referral service located at the Toronto Reference Library that began in 1992 as a pilot funded by the Premier's Council on Health, Well-Being and Social Justice. Its mandate is to improve access to health information for all residents of Ontario by serving as central resource for health information by maintaining and making accessible a reliable, unbiased and up-to-date collection of consumer health materials. Since the successful completion of the pilot in 1993, CHIS has received an annual grant of \$245,000 from the government of Ontario as part of the Ontario Health Promotion Resource System (OHPRS). Within this funding envelope, CHIS currently provides in-person service for 20 hours a week and toll-free telephone information service for 16 hours per week to serve the health information needs of users province-wide. Since its establishment, CHIS was to be fully funded by the province and with a mandate to deliver consumer health information across the province.

On March 30, 2009, TPL was advised by the Ministry of Health Promotion that the \$245,000 annual operating grant for the Consumer Health Information Service would not be renewed effective April 1, 2009. The MHP decision was based on its internal review of the OHPRS of which CHIS was a member and the current budget pressures facing the government of Ontario.

TPL does not have the resources to take on the costs of operating the CHIS service as it currently stands. A full transition plan will need to be developed and implemented to wind down the service.

COMMENTS

While the loss of provincial funding for CHIS is regrettable, delivering services funded by the provincial government has not been without its challenges. Government priorities change over time as has happened in this instance. The MHP has indicated that CHIS service does not align with its current emphasis on working with health promoters and intermediaries to build capacity in the health promotion system. Since the migration of CHIS from the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care to the new MHP in April 2006, the increasing emphasis on working with health promoters and intermediaries has proven a challenge for CHIS which traditionally has provided service to individuals in need of consumer health information.

Experience has also demonstrated that operating funding from the provincial government does not increase as costs escalate resulting in a budget pressure for TPL. Staffing costs which form the bulk of the CHIS budget have risen each year and for example, by May 2003, the Board was advised that CHIS service hours would have to be reduced from 48 per week to 36 (20 hours for walk in and 16 for 1-800 service) in order to deliver the service within the funding envelope provided by the province. With static provincial grants, the service ultimately has to be reduced to the point it is no longer viable.

Staff is working with the MHP to develop a sunset agreement for the service in order to provide some transition funding for CHIS during the close down period.

The discontinuation of the provincial funding and service does provide an opportunity for the Library to develop a plan to deliver consumer health information to its local users in an integrated and cost effective manner within the structure of the Toronto Reference Library.

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SIGNATURE

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