



STAFF REPORT INFORMATION ONLY

Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Program – Service Expansion Considerations

Date: May 25, 2026
To: Toronto Public Library Board
From: City Librarian

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to respond to the Toronto Public Library (TPL) Board’s request for information on the feasibility, cost and service implications of expanding the Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Program beyond its current service level of 1,000 units. This report outlines the current service demand and availability, and outlines expansion options and investments required to deliver those outcomes.

Access to the internet and technology supports full participation in society, education, employment, government, and community. Households without affordable and reliable connectivity face barriers to accessing information and services, maintaining social connection, and completing online tasks required for daily life. Despite increasing access to internet services, many households still face challenges due to the high cost of these services, disproportionately impacting newcomers, Indigenous persons and low-income residents.

TPL’s Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Program currently lends 1,000 mobile Wi-Fi devices on six-month loans through 38 branches. Demand for Wi-Fi Hotspots remains high,

with all 1,000 hotspots checked out during each loan period and with the majority of customers referred through local community partners who identify customers facing barriers to accessing reliable home internet access. Community agencies request more devices than TPL can provide through referrals, and eligible customers report that they cannot access a hotspot because unit availability remains limited and waitlists persist. This unmet demand reflects ongoing digital inequities across Toronto.

Three expansion opportunities have been provided with the associated service impacts and costs. Each level of expansion would allow TPL to further support residents who face barriers in accessing reliable home internet through an increased number of lendable units. In addition, expansion would allow TPL to expand the network of community partners and referrals to the program, as well as increase the number of branches delivering the program, widening the geographic spread of the program across the city.

Any expansion of the Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Program beyond the current service level would require approval of a 2027 operating budget enhancement and/or the securing of sustainable philanthropic or other external funding.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

This report has no financial impact beyond what has been approved in the current year's budget.

The Director, Finance & Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this financial impact statement and agrees with it.

ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PLAN

The Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Program supports TPL's Digital Strategy and Learning & Growth strategic priority by helping ensure low-income residents have reliable internet connectivity to remain connected and access online resources and services.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Program has a positive impact on all equity-deserving groups, with a particular focus on low-income families, by enabling reliable home internet access that helps them stay connected within their communities and access essential online resources and services.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on March 23, 2026, the Toronto Public Library Board considered the [Mobile Devices and Services for Public and Corporate Use –Award of Contract](#) report and approved the recommendations to secure the mobile device vendor contract required to offer this service from May 2026 to April 2028. The Board also directed staff to explore funding options to expand the service and to report back with an update at a future meeting.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Access to the internet and technology supports full participation in society, education, employment, government, and community. Households without affordable, reliable connectivity face barriers to accessing information and services, maintaining social connection, and completing online tasks required for daily life.

Despite the fact that Toronto is approaching universal access to internet services, affordability and quality gaps persist. The [Dais' 2024 survey](#) found that 98% of Toronto residents report having internet services in their home; however, nearly 60,000 residents remain without access to internet in their homes, with cost identified as the top reason for remaining unconnected. This report also found that most Toronto residents pay at least \$110 per month for combined home internet and cell phone plans.

TPL's [Bridge Patron Survey \(2023/2024\)](#) revealed that 35% of respondents reported that the library gave them access to technology they would not otherwise have had, with 10% of those respondents reporting that they did not have internet service installed at home. Respondents also reported using TPL technology services for employment-related skill development (18%) and educational activities

(35%), with higher rates among newcomers, Indigenous persons, and low-income households.

Nationally, the [Government of Canada](#) projects that 98% of Canadians will have access to high-speed internet by 2026 and 100% by 2030. However, even as coverage expands, low-income households are impacted due to the cost of home internet services and rely on subsidies and lending programs to support their connectivity needs.

As a result, public libraries are important access points for technology and, for some people, their only access to the internet. In partnership with the City of Toronto, TPL has offered the Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending program in branches serving communities with a large number of low-income households since 2016. The program now supports a service level of 1,000 Wi-Fi hotspot devices with unlimited data service available for six-month loans. This initiative is aligned with TPL's strategic priority to broaden Toronto's digital access and inclusion across the city.

The Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Program supports the Poverty Reduction Strategy initiative to help further the City's strategic objective of increasing service access and availability. While the Library provides free access to computers and Wi-Fi in all branches, this program provides a temporary option for unlimited access to home internet service for low-income households.

COMMENTS

The current program operates at a service level of 1,000 Wi-Fi hotspot devices loaned for six months. People who do not have internet access at home are at a disadvantage and TPL aims to help bridge the digital divide by lending out Wi-Fi hotspots.

Despite increasing internet coverage, affordability continues to create barriers for many households, particularly newcomers, Indigenous persons, and low-income residents.

Current service demand and availability

All 1,000 Wi-Fi hotspots are regularly checked out during each six-month

distribution cycle, with waitlists persisting across participating branches and ongoing unmet demand from community partners.

Wi-Fi hotspot units are currently provided at 38 branches across the city, prioritizing communities facing the greatest barriers to home internet access. Participating branches are identified based on multiple criteria, including:

- Proximity to [Neighbourhood Improvement Areas \(NIAs\)](#) and Emerging Neighbourhoods;
- Proximity to community agencies that serve low-income and equity-deserving populations;
- Community needs identified by branch staff through frontline service delivery; and
- Geographic distribution and transit accessibility to support equitable city-wide access.

Wi-Fi hotspots are distributed primarily through referrals from community agencies and partners that identify customers in need of the service. This approach is supported by sustained relationships with local community organizations and frontline service providers that serve as access points for their clients. Remaining devices are allocated through walk-in lending for TPL customers who are not connected to a community partner.

Demand for Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending continues to exceed available supply across the system, as evidenced by ongoing community partner referrals, branch-level demand, and consistent feedback from staff and service partners, although quantitative data on unmet demand is not systematically collected. This gap reflects persistent digital inequity rather than short-term fluctuations in demand and reinforces the role of the service as an essential digital access point for low-income Toronto residents.

[Service expansion options and associated investment levels](#)

To illustrate how different investment levels could respond to demonstrated community need and demand for home internet access, the following scenarios outline potential service models along with their operating and staffing implications.

Service Level	Service Outcomes	Annual Operating Need	Key Operating Considerations
Maintain current capacity (1,000 devices)	Maintains current capacity; the program continues to manage access through referrals and limited walk-in lending.	No change (baseline ~\$600K)	Distributed through existing community partner referrals and participating branches. No changes to operation of the service.
Small expansion (+250 devices; 1,250 total)	Increases the number of households served and availability of units during distribution periods. Expansion allows for ability to respond to local demand through partners and existing branches.	\$215K annually +\$150k devices ~+\$65K staffing (0.5 FTE)	Onboarding of additional TPL branches and community partners. Additional staffing required to support administration with branches and partners. Would require two-year commitment.
Moderate expansion (+500 devices; 1,500 total)	Increases the number of households served and availability of units during distribution periods. Larger expansion allows for increase in number of branches distributing units and partner referrals.	\$365K annually +\$300k devices; ~+\$65K staffing (0.5 FTE)	Onboarding of additional TPL branches and community partners. Additional staffing required to support administration with branches and partners. Would require two-year commitment.
Large expansion (+1,000 devices; 2,000 total)	Significant increase to the number of households served. Increase in the number of branches distributing units. Great access across the system and broader targeted promotion.	\$730K annually +\$600k devices; ~+\$130K staffing (1 FTE)	Onboarding of additional TPL branches and community partners. Additional staffing required to support administration with branches and partners. Would require two-year commitment.

These scenarios show how each investment level would change access, service capacity, and operating requirements. Additional staffing requirements are needed for any level of expansion, to ensure customers and participating branches receive timely access, reliable support and equitable service delivery across the system. A minimum two (2) year commitment would be required of any expansion as the vendor hardware + data plan fee model is based on a two-year plan.

Expansion of the Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Program would increase the number of households served, broaden geographic coverage through additional branches, and expand TPL's network of community partners. These changes would

strengthen equitable access to reliable home internet across multiple neighbourhoods while improving responsiveness to local demand.

Any expansion of the Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Program beyond the current service level would require new ongoing operating funding. Implementation of a small, moderate, or large expansion scenario would be contingent on approval of a 2027 operating budget enhancement and/or the successful securing of sustainable philanthropic or external funding to support associated device, data, and staffing costs.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Service Expansion Considerations
Presentation

Wi-Fi Hotspot Lending Program Service Expansion Considerations

Pam Ryan

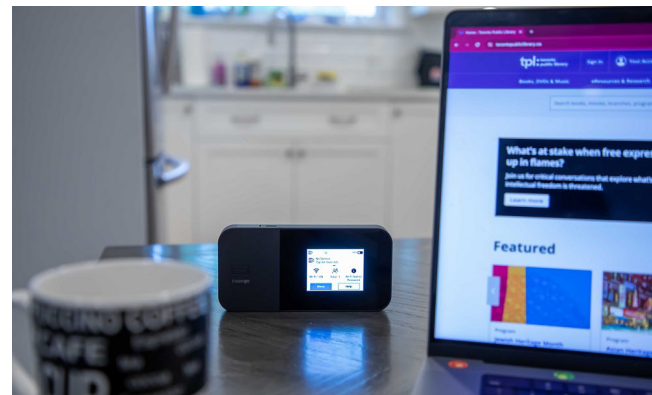
Director, Service Development & Innovation

May 25, 2026

purpose & context

Wi-Fi hotspot lending

- High demand program supporting digital equity
- Report outlines options to expand service
- 1,000 hotspots, 6-month loans, \$600K annually
- Available at 38 branches
- Always fully subscribed



why expansion matters

why expansion matters

- Internet access is essential
- Affordability remains a barrier
- Strong equity impact
- Service design ensures integration with community support agencies

expansion options

expansion options

- +250 devices (small) - \$215K annually
- +500 devices (moderate) - \$365K annually
- +1,000 devices (large) - \$730K annually
- Minimum 2-year expansion commitment

questions

