

March 13, 2026

Dear Hamilton Residents,

We are writing to share important information about what has been happening in and around the Central Library, the steps the library is taking, and how community members can engage with us.

Over the last several years, downtown Hamilton – like many other Canadian cities – has seen an increasing number of people experiencing homelessness, mental health challenges, addictions, and complex health needs. HPL's Central Library, located on York Blvd., has seen an increase in drug use, overdoses, and behaviours that make some people visiting Central feel unsafe or reluctant to use the space, particularly families with children.

We join the broader library community and others in recognizing that a lack of adequate and effective investments in housing, mental health and addictions support from higher levels of government places significant pressures on municipalities, which have limited capacity to respond to these challenges alone. This affects the community and undermines the ability for places like libraries to remain welcoming and accessible.

This winter the crisis reached a level that required urgent action, prompting the leadership team to discuss an emergency closure. The library board asked staff for alternatives to closure which would negatively affect many residents that rely on library services. As an alternative to closure, the board endorsed a two-part strategy to address the ongoing drug use occurring within the library.

To keep Central Library open while supporting the safety of library members and staff, we are implementing a temporary check-in process. This pilot begins March 16 and will be in place for up to two months. All visitors wishing to access the main part of the Central Library will be asked by library staff to scan their library card or show identification to enter the library space. The information will not be tracked or stored.

For more than a decade, HPL has had a low barrier library card that is available to anyone, including people without government-issued identification. This universal access program was first implemented to manage computer access at HPL. Library staff will be available to support visitors obtaining a library card if they do not already have one. Teens and youth will not need to provide a library card or identification.

These changes are intended to maintain broad and inclusive access while introducing a basic level of accountability to support safety for everyone. Visitors who do not already have a Library Card can obtain a card or a visitor pass on the spot by presenting

acceptable identification, making entry straightforward and efficient. We welcome people to continue visiting and using the Library and asking for identification is meant to establish a shared responsibility for the safe and respectful use of this public space—not to create barriers to access.

This new check-in process is designed to prevent drug distribution and consumption in our spaces, which are damaging our ability to function as a public library. The goal of this pilot program is to carefully study its effectiveness, feasibility and impact, then determine if this is a viable measure to put in place if similar challenges return in the future.

The second part of the strategy is ongoing advocacy and consultation, actively engaging community groups in advancing support for meaningful interventions that address the root causes of the crisis. Like many public libraries, HPL is navigating a multi-year challenge that continues to worsen. Addressing it will require coordinated action and meaningful investment at a scale that extends beyond the capacity of libraries alone.

HPL is committed to being available and accessible to everyone. We welcome any support or suggestions that make such a step unnecessary, now or in the future. Our advocacy plan will be communicated separately. As part of this pilot program, we welcome feedback from library users and partners to better understand the direct impacts of the pilot. We will also use this opportunity to engage the community in a broader discussion about the impacts on Hamilton residents – and potential solutions.

In the coming week we will provide more information about what we are doing, how you can participate and have your voice heard. For more information and how to participate in the discussion visit [hpl.ca/central-updates](http://hpl.ca/central-updates).

Regards,

Gagan Batra  
Hamilton Public Library Board Chair

Paul Takala  
CEO and Chief Librarian