

Board of Health Briefing Note

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health
Date: January 27, 2021
Topic: Letter of Support -Bill 226 Broadband is an Essential Service Act, 2020
Submitted by: Dr. Glenn Corneil, Acting Medical Officer of Health/CEO
Prepared by: Walter Humeniuk and Kerry Schubert-Mackey and reviewed by Amanda Mongeon

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Timiskaming Board of Health:

1. Send a [letter of endorsement](#) for **Bill 226, Broadband as an Essential Service Act, 2020** to the Minister of Infrastructure and

FURTHER that a copy of this endorsement be forwarded to:

- 1) John Vanthof, MPP Cochrane-Timiskaming
- 2) Goldie Ghamarie, MPP and Standing Committee on General Government Chair
- 2) Loretta Ryan, Executive Director, Association of Local Public Health Agencies
- 3) Peegen Walsh, Executive Director, Ontario Public Health Association

Overview

- See December Briefing Note Bill 226 Broadband is an Essential Service Act, 2020
<https://www.timiskaminghu.com/436/quarterly-reports-briefing-notes-other>

January 20, 2021

Honourable Laurie Scott
Ministry of Infrastructure
5th Floor 777 Bay St.
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

Re: Bill 226, Broadband is an Essential Services Act, 2020.

On behalf of the Timiskaming Board of Health, I am writing to express our support for Bill 226, Broadband is an Essential Service Act, 2020.

Internet connectivity impacts the health and well-being of individuals and the communities in which they live, work, learn and play. Affordable, quality Internet access intersects with many social determinants of health, including income, employment, education, and access to health services and social supports.¹ Additionally, the Internet has become one of the most common sources for accessing credible health information.²

However, broadband Internet access is not universal and disparities in access to affordable and quality Internet exist among certain demographic groups. Residents of rural communities have particularly low levels of broadband access.^{1,3} Further, racial and ethnic minorities, Indigenous peoples, older adults, and those with lower education and income levels are also less likely to have broadband at home.¹ Disparities in broadband Internet access exacerbate disparities in other social determinants of health, contributing to health and well-being inequities.¹ Unfortunately, those who could benefit the most from digital access are the least likely to have affordable and quality Internet access. This digital divide, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, was identified as an issue in the Timiskaming district by a local COVID-19 Community Collaborative.

Sparsely populated rural areas such as Timiskaming are more likely than urban areas to experience gaps in both availability and quality of broadband due to perceived low profitability for private Internet service providers.^{1,3} Furthermore, local governments vary in their capacities to leverage funding opportunities and pursue or support equitable solutions. When Internet connectivity is available in rural areas, data plans are often limited and unaffordable for many. Currently, only 45.6% of rural Canadians have access to minimal broadband download speeds of 50 megabits per second (Mbps) and upload speeds of 10 Mbps as set by the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC).⁴

Broadband Internet access has evolved into an essential service and an important determinant of health and well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated the need for investment and regulatory models that ensure *everyone* has affordable and quality digital access to educational and economic opportunities and health services. Treating broadband Internet access as an essential service with equity as a core principle would contribute to the success of COVID-19 public health measures, mitigating related harms as well as ending hallway medicine. Now, more than ever, all Ontarians need access to fast, reliable, and affordable Internet to

learn, work, socialize, and access services and credible information. Bill 226 provides a pivotal opportunity to further this endeavour.

Sincerely,

Carman Kidd, Chair

CC

John Vanthof, MPP Timiskaming-Cochrane

Goldie Ghamari, MPP and Standing Committee on General Government Chair comm-generalgov@ola.org

Loretta Ryan, Executive Director, Association of Local Public Health Agencies

Peegen Walsh, Executive Director, Ontario Public Health Association

References

1. Crock Bauerly, B., McCord, R.F., Hulkower, R., & Pepin, D. (2019). Broadband access as a public health issue: The role of law in expanding broadband access and connecting underserved communities for better outcomes. *Journal of Law, Medicine, & Ethics*, 47 S2, 39-42. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1073110519857314>
2. Rootman, I and Gordon-El-Bihbety, D. (2008). A Vision for a Health Literate Canada: Report of the expert panel on health literacy. https://www.cpha.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/resources/healthlit/report_e.pdf
3. Heppner, K. (2020, May 27). Massive rural-urban Internet divide growing during COVID-19. *Real agriculture*. Accessed on May 29, 2020 from: <https://www.realagriculture.com/2020/05/massive-rural-urban-Internet-divide-growing-during-covid-19/>
4. Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (2020, Dec. 10). Broadband fund: Closing the digital divide in Canada. Accessed on January 19, 2021 from: <https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/Internet/Internet.htm>