

Board of Health Briefing Note

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health
Date: December 3, 2020
Topic: **Bill 226 Broadband is an Essential Service Act, 2020**
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RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Timiskaming Board of Health:

- 1. Instruct Timiskaming Health Unit staff to prepare a letter of endorsement for Bill 226, Broadband as an Essential Service Act, 2020 for Board of Health approval at the regular February 2021 meeting.**

Overview

- There is a digital divide in the District of Timiskaming: a discrepancy between those who have access to information and communication technologies and the benefits they provide and those who don't. This divide can be the result of many factors including high costs for technology and online access and limited Internet connectivity in rural Northern Ontario.
- Lack of equitable access to technology has become a critical issue for many and the COVID-19 pandemic has served to underscore and exacerbate these already significant inequalities. Now more than ever there is a need to be connected as many mental and physical health services are being delivered virtually, financial supports often require online applications, many are required to participate in distance learning, and/or have the ability to work from home and family and friends are able to maintain social connections through online tools while physically distancing from each other.
- [Bill 226, Broadband as an Essential Service Act, 2020](#) An Act to enact the Broadband is an Essential Service Act, 2020. Introduced by John Vanthof, a New Democratic Party Member of Provincial Parliament for Timiskaming-Cochrane, the Bill received a second reading and was referred to the Standing Committee November 26, 2020. The purpose of this Act is to guide policies and investments towards a goal of universal access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet, particularly for Northern and rural Ontarians, given that high-speed internet constitutes an essential service. The Act requires the Minister of Infrastructure to develop a Broadband Connectivity Strategy that aims to deliver high-speed internet connectivity to 95 per cent of Ontarians by 2026 and to all Ontarians by 2030. The Minister is required to update the strategy at specified intervals and undertake certain consultations in developing or updating the strategy.

Ontario Public Health Standards (2018) and Timiskaming Health Unit Strategic Plan 2019-2023

See Board of Health Briefing Note previous [Closing the Digital Divide in Timiskaming \(November 2020\)](#).

Background

See Board of Health Briefing Note previous [Closing the Digital Divide in Timiskaming \(November 2020\)](#).

Further to the data shared in the November Briefing Note, the annual report of Dr. Theresa Tam, Chief Public Health Officer of Canada was tabled in parliament (October 28, 2020). The report entitled [From Risk to Resilience: An Equity Approach to COVID-19 describes the broad consequences of COVID-19](#) calls for the incorporation of a health equity approach into pandemic preparedness, response and recovery. In a related [statement \(October 28, 2020\)](#) Dr. Tam states how COVID-19 has also shown the interconnectedness of our health, social and economic policies and supports.

With respect to areas of action and the digital divide, Dr. Tam's report identifies digital access to care and mental health as areas to continue to work together on to influence our success against any resurgence of COVID-19 or other pandemics. The report also highlights the need to continue to adjust to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 and to build upon the social, health and economic responses and improve these systems.

Specific to addressing the digital divide the report suggests work to identify populations that may have less access to virtual care and mitigate access barriers including support for low-cost broadband access.

Timiskaming Health Unit Actions

In the November Closing the Digital Divide in Timiskaming briefing note the following actions were outlined to address digital access as a determinant of health with barriers to access including technology, digital literacy and affordable and quality broadband Internet:

- Continue to bring partners together to discuss mitigating health and well-being disparities related to COVID-19 in Timiskaming, including improving access to technology and Internet.
- Coordinate and collaborate with partners to implement the Closing the Digital Divide Pilot Project across the district. Furthermore, THU will lead evaluation of the pilot project to assess impact, inform local decision making related to the project and inform other jurisdictions.
- Support opportunities for additional funding to extend the duration and reach based on expressed interest of community partners (e.g. Home Support- older adults, Keepers of the Circle – Indigenous communities).
- Support digital health literacy in the population and promote digital literacy skills training opportunities, including connecting to existing local resources and services.
- Examine best practices in provision of virtual care and explore opportunities to support internal and external health service providers in awareness, knowledge and skills regarding digital health with a health equity lens.
- Explore upstream actions to address digital inequality including increasing the availability of quality, affordable broadband internet. This will include connecting with local MPP, FONOM President and AMO Executive Director and Northeast Caucus Chair.

As a result of ongoing data gathering and further to the above, THU staff will prepare a letter of endorsement related to Bill 226, an Act to enact the Broadband is an Essential Service Act, 2020, explore capacity to increase awareness of partners and the public of the issue of the digital divide and integrating health equity into policy solutions. THU will also share this work with public health colleagues in the Northeast.