Access to Technology in Timiskaming:
The Digital Divide

June 15, 2020

THE SITUATION

Daily aspects of our lives are increasingly touched by digital technology, and access to high-speed Internet has become both essential service and key driver for improving our economic and social well-being and in democratic participation and freedom of expression[1]. The United Nations recognizes the Internet as a human right.[2]

There is a digital divide in Canada: a discrepancy exists between Canadians 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, differences in the availability of online connectivity resources including limited internet connectivity in rural Northern Ontario and lacking digital literacy.

The digital divide also stems from income inequality among Canadians and differences in online connectivity practices exhibited by those of different age, gender, first language, and cultural background. Many of these same inequalities contribute to a lack of access for those in local communities, known as Internet inequity: differential access to the internet based on the factors mentioned above as well as community wealth, rurality, socioeconomic status and ethnicity[3]. The percentage of Ontario seniors age 65 and over that use the internet continues to be lower than the rest of the population and tends to be influenced by income. Of the seniors in the lowest income level, 63.5% have home internet access compared to 88.2% of seniors in the second level, 94.9% in the third and 97.1% in the highest income level.[3] Overall, 94.5% of Ontarians have home internet access but again, this percentage varies by income.[4] For example, 83.4% of those in the lowest income bracket have home internet access compared to 94.9% in the second income bracket, 98.7% in the third income bracket, and 99.8% of those in the highest income bracket.[4]

In the Timiskaming Health Unit catchment area, there are an estimated 860 households with an annual income below $20,000.[5] Based on the above figures, about 143 of the lowest-income households across the region would not have access to home internet.

Of Canadians who did not have access to home internet, 47% have said it was because they couldn’t afford the internet services or the technical devices, while 8% noted the unavailability of internet services.[6] Rural areas across Northern Ontario are more likely than urban areas to experience the absence of internet services or poor quality and high cost of services when available.[7]

TECHNOLOGY AND COVID-19

Lack of equitable access to technology has been a long-standing issue for vulnerable populations including seniors and families living with low income. Access to technology was already a barrier for many prior to COVID-19, and the global pandemic has exacerbated this and a host of other pre-existing equity issues. Access to technology has become a critical issue now more than ever as many mental and physical health services are being delivered virtually, financial supports often

require online applications, students are asked to participate in distance learning, and family and friends are able to maintain social connections through web based communication tools while physically distancing from each other. The Internet is also one of the most common sources of health information, and inequitable access to this information.[8]

With work from home orders leading to an increased requirement for network access, geography is becoming an even bigger barrier to equality of opportunity for rural Canadians. The closure of non-essential services and workplaces such as cafes, restaurants and libraries to slow the spread of COVID-19 cut many families off from their sole access to internet.

Federal and provincial governments have funds available to support community-based organizations in addressing pressing social inclusion or well-being needs caused by COVID-19, including replacing in-person, one-on-one contact and social gatherings with virtual contact through phone calls, texts, teleconferences, or the Internet. ***Appendix A*** highlights some of the new funding opportunities that can help support access in our communities.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Solutions to the issues discussed here can be both short-term and longer-term, the latter of which will require addressing the systemic issue of Internet inequity[3]. Organizations across Canada have been collaborating and advocating to come up with creative ways to help bridge the digital divide for many years. A list of these and other promising interventions can be found in ***Appendix B*** below. The appendix includes a description of how two school boards within Timiskaming addressed the digital divide for their students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

NEXT STEPS

The problem described above includes several opportunities for intervention: access to appropriate technological devices, access to suitable quality and affordable internet, and possession of the skills needed to use the technology. Staff at Timiskaming Health Unit are moving forward with considering the evidence shared here to support collaborative action in each of these areas.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has served to underscore and exacerbate the already significant inequalities between rural and urban Canada, in terms of access to reliable and fast internet. More than ever, Canadians need access to fast, reliable and affordable Internet to learn, work, socialize and access services. The digital divide is making it increasingly difficult for marginalized populations to stay connected during the COVID-19 crisis, and therefore for multiple sectors to support them.

With funds available to help with local response and solutions brainstormed with local partners, the opportunity exists to make technology accessible to more seniors and families experiencing financial hardship in our region. Not just during the pandemic, but into the future.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Possible Funding Sources

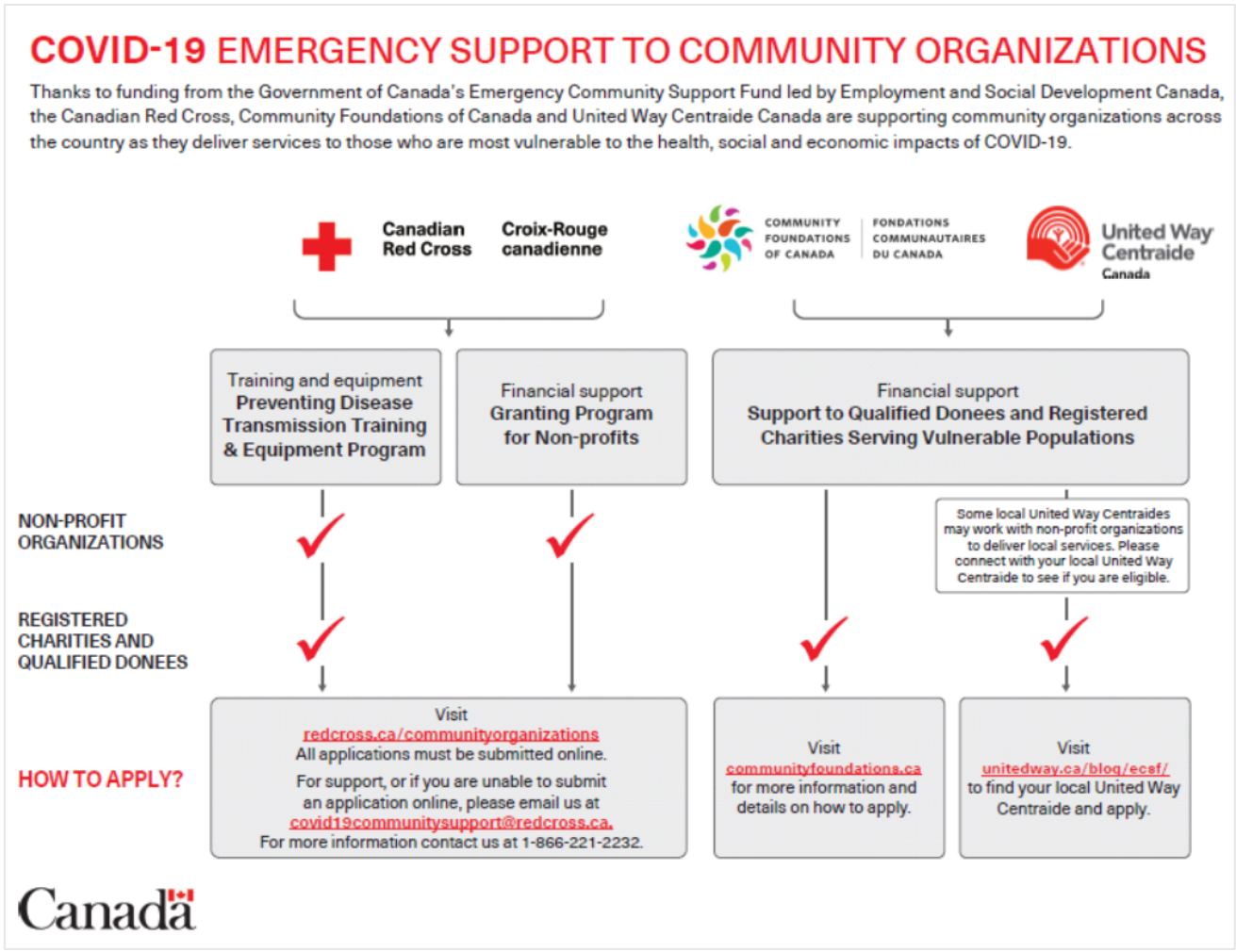
New Horizons for Seniors Program (NHSP) has been expanded with an additional investment of $20 million to support organizations that offer community-based projects that reduce isolation, improve the quality of life of seniors, and help them maintain a social support network. That means funding for activities such as virtual exercise classes, providing tablets and tutorials on video conferencing, deliveries of food or medication, or helping seniors get to the doctor.

Emergency Community Support Funding (ECSF) – see chart below
https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/emergency-community-support-fund.html
$350 million being given out via ECSF to improve the ability of community organizations to serve vulnerable Canadians during the COVID-19 crisis.

As of May 19, 2020 community-based organizations from across the country will be able to apply for funding to support a variety of activities that address a pressing social inclusion or well-being need caused by COVID-19 including replacing in-person, one-on-one contact and social gatherings with virtual contact through phone calls, texts, teleconferences, or the Internet.

Dollars are distributed through the organizations below:

- **United Way Centraide Canada** – grants are $50,000 each and there is $1 million available in the northeast. Applications accepted until July 13, 2020.
- **Community Foundations of Canada**– grants are $40,000 and applications are accepted until July 27, 2020
- **Canadian Red Cross** – grants are up to $100,000 and applications are accepted until June 21, 2020



Ontario Investing in Reliable Internet for Northern Ontario - June 16, 2020 News Release

Funding for Broadband Infrastructure Across the North via Northern Ontario Heritage Fund (NOHFC) including $232,500 for North Eastern Ontario Communications Network (NEOnet) Inc. to launch and administer it's Broadband for Remote Areas program, which will provide grants to small and medium sized enterprises located in Northern Ontario to assist with the purchase and installation of specialized equipment that will provide two-way, high speed internet service. https://news.ontario.ca/mndmf/en/2020/06/ontario-investing-in-reliable-internet-for-northern-ontario.html

Examples of Programs to make Technology more Accessible

ACORN Canada (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) an independent national organization and their ***Internet for All*** campaign have been working with low and moderate income families to access affordable internet. In August 2019 they launched a report: **Barriers to Digital Equality in Canada**. The data was collected through a survey of 500 low income and moderate income household members across Canada. The report finds a digital divide between Canadians based on income. A copy of the report can be found here. https://acorncanada.org/resource/barriers-digital-equality-canada

On May 6, 2020, The Shadow Minister for Industry and Economic Development, announced the launch of **Connect Canada – Conservative Call to Action on Rural Internet Access**, which makes 14 policy recommendations. https://mprempel.ca/news/f/connect-canada---call-to-action-on-rural-internet-access

Connecting Northern Communities http://www.connectednorth.ca/
ConnectedNorth.ca was created to help you find services to connect in Northern Ontario. Stay connected to the office, to loved ones and to the rest of the world. Use this website to learn about broadband services in Northern Ontario and feel free to make it a part of your plan for better broadband advocacy in Northern Ontario.

Government of Canada https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/139.nsf/eng/home
All Canadians, no matter where they live, need high-speed Internet to connect with family, keep up at school, run a business and access essential medical services. That's why the Government of Canada has programs under way to connect Canadians living in rural and remote areas, aiming to connect 95% of Canadians to high-speed Internet by 2026 and all Canadians by 2030.

Connecting Families https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/111.nsf/eng/home
Families who currently receive the maximum Canada Child Benefit receiving letters enabling them to participate in this initiative. The initiative was designed to connect the lowest-income families to the Internet. The Connecting Families initiative is investing $13.2 million over five years, starting in 2017-2018 to help bridge the digital divide for Canadian families who may struggle to afford access to home Internet. With this funding, Computers for Success Canada has developed a secure online portal that will enable eligible Canadian families to access high speed Internet service packages for $10 per month from participating Internet Service Providers. The Connecting Families initiative will help connect up hundreds of thousands of Canadians to the Internet and will distribute up to 50,000 computers to eligible households. These efforts will ensure that more Canadian families and youth have access to the valuable resources available on the Internet and give them access to the tools they need to be successful and thrive.

Telus Internet for Good Program https://www.telus.com/en/about/company-overview/community-investment/how-we-give/cause-campaigns/internet-for-good
Having access to reliable internet is essential in today's interconnected world. But for low-income families it can still be a struggle. Internet for Good™ is an innovative program offered in BC and AB

that provides eligible Canadians with the tools and connectivity they need to succeed. Families receiving the maximum Canada Child Benefit can apply for the Internet for Good program.

Mental Health & Addictions North COVID-19 Innovations – Championing Access to Technology for Individuals Living in Poverty
Legal clinic in Thunder Bay, with the support of community partners, wrote a letter to the local telecommunications company requesting access to technology support for those living in poverty. Over 100 free cellphones with data plans have been distributed and WiFi hotspots were set up in 5 community housing buildings.

COVID Innovation Northern - Champio

Electronic Recycling Association https://www.electronicrecyclingassociation.ca/
The Electronic Recycling Association (ERA) is a non-profit organization that has been reducing unnecessary electronic waste since 2004. We reduce adverse environmental contribution through electronic recycling, repurposing and through the donation of electronics and other IT Equipment. With a number of drop off locations around Canada based primarily out of Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, Saskatoon, Toronto, Montreal and Winnipeg, and an electronic pickup service, the ERA provides a meaningful way for organizations and individuals to deal with their old computer equipment in a safe and secure manner that matches or exceeds government standards.

Connected for Success https://about.rogers.com/giving-back/connected-for-success/
Connected for Success offers high-speed, low-cost internet to subsidized tenants and members of housing partners across Ontario, New Brunswick and Newfoundland. We have more than 340 housing partners participating in the program with more than 250,000 eligible households, including seniors, families with children, and those who live alone.

Renewed Computer Technology Outreach http://www.rcto.ca/programs-rctech-outreach.asp
RCT- Renewed Computer Technology is a not for profit organization that recycles computers that are donated from government offices and then fulfills a mandate to make them financially accessible to any education service in the community, as well as to students who are seniors or students who qualify for financial support (from OSAP, for example).

City of Toronto and partners help connect vulnerable populations with internet access during COVID-19 pandemic https://www.toronto.ca/news/city-of-toronto-and-partners-help-connect-vulnerable-populations-with-internet-access-during-covid-19-pandemic/

The City of Toronto has partnered with technology and telecommunications companies to provide free temporary internet access for many vulnerable Torontonians. These partnerships will provide free access for residents in lower-income neighbourhoods, seniors in long-term care homes and clients in many City-operated shelters. These initiatives will allow more people to connect online to social supports and vital services while still complying with directives to stay at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Basic service package
In 2016 the CRTC mandated television service providers to offer a basic TV package to customers for a maximum price of $25, which can then be expanded upon by purchasing additional channels. The purpose of such a package is to make television service affordable for Canadians who otherwise might not be able to afford a package that includes various extra or undesired channels. The same has been proposed to be done for broadband service by having the CRTC determine a sufficient service quality of fixed price that ISPs will be mandated to offer to customers. As low cost internet connectivity options in Canada have been disappearing in favour of mid to high level packages priced at an average of around $50, it is believed that such regulation would contribute to the narrowing of the digital divide within Canada for those who lack sufficient access due to monetary reasons.

Bridging the Digital Divide with **Kajeet** https://www.kajeet.net/plans#smartbus
Kajeet provides schools and districts filtered connectivity and device management solutions.
Kajeet SmartSpot® - Filtered, Wi-Fi hotspots allow students to access the Internet anytime, anywhere. Keep students safe and on task while connected to the largest Canadian wireless network. These devices help close the Digital Divide by providing students without Internet at home to keep up with their well-connected peers.

CyberSeniors https://cyberseniors.org/
An intergenerational approach to digital literacy across North America. Cyber-Seniors Technology Mentors are young people who have been trained to teach technology to older adults including how to set up a video call with family and friends, order groceries online, stream movies and schedule video and medical appointments. This program is free will be offered in French by July 2020. Timiskaming Health Unit is registered as a partner with the program.

School Board Experiences

School boards across the country had to deal with these barriers to access in real time, as the pandemic forced schools to close their doors in mid-March and teachers and students began engaging in distance learning. In reaching out to local school boards, we learned how they handled this challenge this unprecedented time.

District School Board Ontario Northeast (DSBONE) secondary schools provide iPads to their students in grades 7-12 at the beginning of the school year, so access to technology was not a concern.

Le Conseil scolaire catholique de district des Grandes Rivières and DSBONE elementary schools began by surveying their students to determine whether students had access to a device and internet to engage in distance learning. Board laptops or iPads were provided to those students without devices.

For DSBONE secondary students without access to internet, access points were set up at schools in the district so that students could drive there to download their work, and upload completed assignments. Students could then do their work from home without the need for internet. In communities without a school, agreements were made with municipalities to allow access near public libraries, or in cases where there was not school, local businesses offered their service (motel in Latchford as an example stepped up).

MiFi devices and ZTE TurboHubs were provided to families in need by both school boards. These are wireless routers that acts as mobile Wi-Fi hotspot and can be connected to a cellular network and provide Internet access for up to ten devices. https://www.bell.ca/Mobility/Products/Novatel-Wireless-MiFi-7000

The cost for a MiFi device is $200 and for ZTE Hurbo Hubs is $400. For both devices plans are then purchased and can vary from $20/month for 10GB of data or $60/month for unlimited access.

On May 31, 2020, Ontario's education minister called on Ottawa to expedite federal funding to address a lack of broadband access in the province.
https://www.cp24.com/news/ontario-s-education-minister-calls-on-federal-government-to-address-lack-of-broadband-access-1.4962414