

# Guelph Community Health Centre

## A Collective Impact Approach to bridging the digital divide

For Guelph Community Health Centre (CHC), the pandemic did not cause digital equity; it only served to widen an already large digital divide. The Alliance spoke with Kate Vsetula, Director of Community and Organizational Development at the Guelph CHC about the work the centre was doing in digital equity.

The pandemic lockdown was the impetus that caused Guelph CHC to quickly pivot to a two-pronged approach to addressing digital equity. The first was to ensure that their staff and providers had all the digital tools and support necessary to move forward with providing virtual care. Developing this robust support system was extremely intensive work as the organization acted to ensure that staff and providers were prepared to move forward. While this important work was being done, Guelph CHC was also developing the second prong – ensuring that their most marginalized clients were able to connect with their healthcare providers and the world around them.

Guelph CHC understood that the lockdown would be extremely challenging to many of its clients. Prior to the pandemic, their myriad of outreach services ensured that clients did not have to go far to connect with each other and their providers. However, physical distancing quickly morphed into social isolation.

Guelph CHC kicked off their digital equity pandemic response with several smartphones that were donated by TELUS through the Alliance for Healthier Communities. These phones were distributed to clients - and the positive outcome was immediate. With the assistance of their strong network of volunteers, they were able to identify several who were very tech savvy and who became the client tech support system. Using their existing social prescription workflows, providers could easily identify clients who needed technical assistance, and then write a social prescription to this innovative technical support group.



These phones were just the beginning. Recognizing the broader need, the centre decided to adopt a collective impact approach and worked with several local organizations that were also interested in addressing digital equity. Thanks to a United Way grant, they were able to launch the “Get Connected” program. The program originally started using recycled devices but quickly found that making those devices work was extremely challenging; and so, there was a pivot to increase the availability of new phones while making best use of the usable donated phones wherever possible. The Guelph CHC worked closely with WOW Boutique to enable the phones with talk and text plans. To help fill the phone data gap, Guelph also created a Wi-Fi map. This map helped clients identify all the locations across the city with free Wi-Fi. Working with Freedom Mobile, Guelph CHC was also able to get several devices with low-cost 6-month plans. These phones have been put in the client’s name so that at the end of the 6-month period, the client will become responsible for continuing the plan if they choose to. Freedom Mobile committed to offering the best price at that time.

Guelph CHC continues to work with its various community partners to address the ongoing need of its clients and community related to digital inequities. Their collective impact approach and its subsequent outcomes thus far, proves that this approach is one that promises to bridge the digital equity gap.