Alliance for Healthier Communities

Health Equity includes Digital Equity

Omer is seventy-four years old. He suffers from multiple chronic conditions for which he must visit his doctor regularly. He has a cellphone but only knows how to make and receive calls.

Alisha lives with her mom who works two jobs. Alisha loves school. After school, she depends on the local library to access the Internet and help get her schoolwork done.

Dave had not been in contact with his family for over a year. He was sure they did not know if he was even alive. Having no fixed address meant that he could not qualify for a cellphone, but he also could not afford one. He would not even know where to charge a device if he had one.

Terri lives in subsidized housing in a small rural town. She depends on the Wi-Fi at the local coffee shop for Internet access. It is how she stays in touch with her family and communicates with government and charitable organizations.

A provincial state of emergency, declared on March 17th 2020, forced the closure of businesses and facilities in Ontario because of the Coronavirus and drastically changed the lives of all these people. Suddenly, being able to visit the doctor, go to school or access the Internet became impossible. People who were already facing barriers to healthcare, social services and education now faced what seemed to be an insurmountable barrier – no access.

The pandemic served to emphasize the importance of digital equity. Digital equity is described as a state where people can readily and effectively access and use technology to participate in society. As healthcare providers quickly moved their services online and virtually, the connection between digital equity and health equity became manifestly obvious. Those who are most at risk and vulnerable are also those who are least likely to be able to afford access to the Internet for information, education and communication. For people, like Dave, who are experiencing homelessness, even a lack of electricity to recharge devices such as phones or tablets can be an additional barrier to digital participation. There is also a part of the population that mistrusts government and are hesitant to use digital services if they must identify themselves – even if the service is free.

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In today's increasingly online world, working towards digital equity is a must. Access to digital and virtual tools is a determinant of health and must be universally recognized as such. Digital access and the skills to use digital and virtual tools need to be recognized as a determinant of health.

The Alliance for Healthier Communities Executive Leaders Network understands that digital equity and the barriers it creates are a direct consequence of systemic inequities. No one gets left behind challenges us to realize digital equity for all living in Ontario. The Alliance created the Digital Equity Examples Diary, a Digital Equity Playbook and a video to help members develop their digital equity strategy and share their successes.

Want to know more about Digital Equity? Email ims@allianceon.org