

Alliance for Healthier Communities

Digital Equity Champion



West Elgin Community Health Centre *Digital Equity – Digital Navigator and iPad Loan Program*

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown wreaked havoc on people and the communities where they lived. People were suddenly isolated from, family, friends, community support services and primary care services. . This isolation served to emphasize the importance of the ability to participate in our ever-increasing technology-driven society. Digital equity is described as a state where people can readily and effectively access and use technology to participate in society.

Client feedback - West Elgin CHC iPad Loan Program



To say this iPad changed my life might sound like a cliché or an over exaggeration but nothing could be further from the truth. Prior to this program I had limited, at best, access to internet as I am battling several serious, chronic illnesses and subsequently live far below the poverty line. Internet is financially out of reach for me. Since the onset of the pandemic, I had lost the ability to connect with my grandkids, pay my bills (I frequently accessed computers with internet at the library, which closed during the pandemic), socialize and I even lost some of my health care due to my inability to have virtual appointments. With the iPad Loan Program suddenly I had access to all of that and more. As I am mostly home bound, I have used the iPad to keep my mind fresh by taking free courses from MIT, have facetime with my grandkids regularly, play games, watch TV, read, socialize in virtual groups, and even now have the ability to have virtual appointments. It truly has changed my life for the better and has helped me find a new happiness where things were quite bleak.

Members of the Alliance for Healthier Communities, as community-governed primary healthcare organizations, quickly realised the physical and mental health risks of the lockdown and pivoted to reimagine their service delivery and care for their clients. One such organization was West Elgin Community Health Centre providing health and social services to the residents of Dutton Dunwich and West Elgin municipalities in Ontario. The Alliance interviewed Barry Fellingner, Director Community Health Services, Shelly Vergeer, CSS and Volunteer Coordinator, Jenna Noorenberghe, CSS Life Enrichment Lead and Taryn VanderMeulen, Digital Navigator, (Former).

As the Community Health Centre (CHC) moved to a virtual practice they quickly realized that many of the people they served, especially the seniors and persons with disabilities, were

Alliance for Healthier Communities

Digital Equity Champion



struggling with the change to a virtual platform. To address this desperate need, West Elgin staff applied to and were the successful recipients of an Ontario Trillium Foundation Resilient Communities Fund grant. One primary focus of this funding is to address social isolation issues through the provision of online programming, digital device distribution and virtual education strategies. Through this grant, the centre was able to purchase tablets and data packages along with funding for a role to help administer the program. What they quickly discovered was that many of the intended participants did not understand how to use the technology or in some cases, distrusted it. The administrator role morphed into coaching and teaching and the digital navigator role was created. This was something that resonated with both staff and clients of West Elgin CHC. Years previously, they established the role of a system navigator to assist clients in navigating the often time-consuming and complicated healthcare, social services, legal and other systems.

The digital navigator works in two different capacities. From the technology perspective, they help individuals to better understand technology and the use of their devices. This can also include support in obtaining a device, internet access, learning how to use the device, or a combination of all three of these. From a system navigation perspective, they help individuals to access available services and programs in the community - other than those provided by the CHC - by reaching out to service providers in the community to identify and determine pathways for individuals to connect and creating the training resources necessary to access them.

When asked about the challenges they faced in implementing and running this much needed program, the answer unequivocal. Sustainable funding. 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 along with the requisite sustainable funding.

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



Client feedback - West Elgin CHC iPad Loan Program



I have participated in exercise programs held at the West Elgin Health Centre and have found that *exercise* does help.

Not only has this opportunity of using your iPad helped my mind, but the visits are nice for me to have someone in person to chat with.

Also this program is a really big plus for me and my sister-in-law. She has lived with me for over 25 years. She deals with a lot of depression. This past year was terrible for her. She has never touched a computer, nor does she have a cell phone.

We started her on music that she likes. She is now listening to music. Learning more about her favourite musicians - things that she never heard before.

She felt that she did not have the ability to learn. However, now with my help she is starting to feel better. She now knows she can learn and she feels better about herself.

I also see an improvement in her depression.