

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Dr. Christopher Mackie, Medical Officer of Health; Emily Williams, CEO (Interim)

DATE: 2021 June 17

MLHU TECHNOLOGY GRANT PROJECT

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive Report No. 29-21 re: “MLHU Technology Grant Project” for information.

Key Points

- The Nurse-Family Partnership, Healthy Babies Healthy Children, Outreach and COVID Teams were approved for a joint grant through the United Way Emergency Community Support Fund to support clients with access to technology.
- Participants benefitted from the Technology Grant Project which supported their ability to: connect with their Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU) provider and/or Health Unit services; connect with other health care and social services; connect with family and friends; and access health information via news, emergency government alerts, and the Health Unit website.
- The MLHU Technology Grant Project has highlighted the need to consider digital equity when considering how programs and services are offered in the future.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a shift in how technology is viewed – from seeing it as an option to understanding it is a necessity – and has highlighted the importance of considering digital equity when considering how programs and services are offered. During the pandemic, many services have been increasingly or exclusively operating remotely, placing individuals with limited or no access to technology at a significant disadvantage.

The Nurse-Family Partnership, Healthy Babies Healthy Children, Outreach and COVID Teams were approved for a joint grant for \$50,000 through the United Way Emergency Community Support Fund to support clients with access to technology. The funds were used to provide clients with cell phones or tablets and/or vouchers for pay-as-you-go talk, text and data plans to increase their access to essential services and supports in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This project was also supported by the Information Technology, Operations, and Program Planning and Evaluation Teams.

Program Implementation and Evaluation

Specific eligibility criteria were set to determine which clients would receive technology and/or vouchers through this initiative, including financial need and current use of Health Unit services. Between January 1, 2021 and March 31, 2021, 82 individuals participated in the MLHU Technology Grant Project. Seventy-six devices were provided, of which 58 phones were Samsung 7 mobile devices that belonged to MLHU but were no longer used by MLHU employees. Remaining devices (including three Samsung CoreA01 and 15 Samsung Tablets) were purchased with grant funds. Eighty-one participants received prepaid minute and data plans (one client was locked into an existing plan but did not have a functioning phone and received a phone without a plan). Forty-four participants received six months of prepaid minute and data plans through Chatr Mobile; 29 participants received six months of prepaid minute and data plans through Chatr mobile in

addition to one to three months of unlimited minute and data plans through Rogers; and eight participants received one to three months of unlimited minute and data plans through Rogers (contact was lost with these clients and we were unable to transition them to Chatr Mobile accounts). Chatr plans included unlimited Canada-wide talk and data per month (10GB at 3G and then at a reduced speed until the anniversary date). Additional devices and vouchers for minute/data plans were purchased to support clients beyond March 31, 2021.

A follow-up survey was conducted with project participants to evaluate how their participation in the project benefitted them during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Appendix A](#)). Responses were received from 16 individuals (19.5% response rate). Respondents indicated their participation in this project supported their ability to: connect with their MLHU provider and/or Health Unit services; connect with other health care and social services; connect with family and friends; and access health information via news, emergency government alerts and the Health Unit website. All respondents agreed having access to a device with minutes and/or data would help them access services and supports post-pandemic.

A report on the MLHU Technology Grant Project was submitted to the United Way in April, as requested. Project participants who responded to the survey also shared the following quotes:

“I have never had a cell phone before. It has been so good to be able to call for help when I needed it.”

“Having access to data was super useful. It helped me stay in contact with family and friends during my pregnancy and child’s birth. I was also able to contact services like cabs/taxis, doctors etc. a lot faster and easier than I was ever able to before having the technology grant.”

“I’m happy I was able to get my phone especially cuz sometimes I struggle to pay bill’s.”

“Thank you for helping my family stay in contact with family, friends and services (like baby classes!) what a great initiative.”

“ . . . it does help us keep in touch with yous especially when we need somebody.”

“It was great and I really appreciated the phone, it has really helped me stay connected.”

“You guys would never (know) how much I appreciate this phone....(partner’s name) too, it helps us so much on a daily basis...we were so lost without it lol Thank u so much Honestly its the first phone in 10-15 years I’ve kept longer than one month.”

Next Steps

Response to the COVID-19 pandemic has changed how prioritized Health Unit programs and services have been offered since March 2020, with an increased use of telephone and videoconferencing to connect with clients, when appropriate. This shift in service delivery has acutely highlighted the digital divide in London and Middlesex County, in which those without access to technology and/or data experience significant barriers that prevent them from accessing a variety of services, many of which have only been offered remotely since the beginning of the pandemic. The MLHU Technology Grant Project has highlighted the need to consider digital equity when considering how programs and services are offered in the future.

This report was submitted by the Healthy Start Division.



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