

Increasing Access to Technology in Timiskaming: **Closing the Digital Divide**

Lorna Desmarais, Public Health Promoter
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Good evening everyone, my name is Lorna Desmarais, and I am a PHP at THU. Thank you for allowing me a bit of time on the agenda today to share some information about an innovative and exciting project that was led by THU called Closing the Digital Divide.

Overview of Presentation

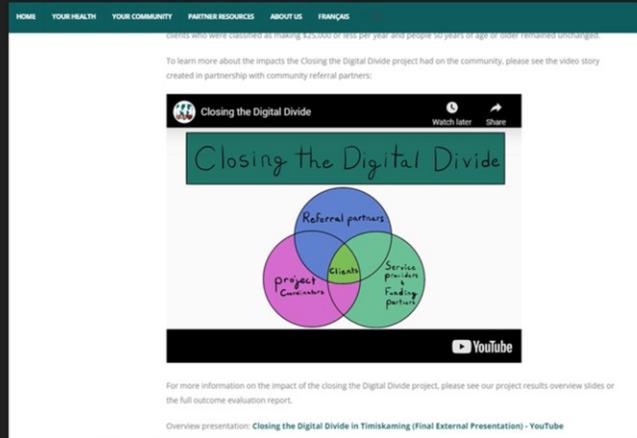
- Digital Divide Project Overview – Video
- Summary of Project Timeline and Funding
- Evaluation Results
- Microgrant Initiative
- Key Recommended Actions
- Questions?

Just a little overview of what we'll cover in our short time together

Digital Divide Project Overview



<https://youtu.be/5sTOK6B55XA>



This video that was put together by Robert Northcroft, a public health promoter who was hired to coordinate this project for a period of time. It is available to view on the health unit website and I think it nicely outlines much of the info you've received in the briefing note.

- What the Digital Divide is and who's most at risk
- Why it is an issue
- How the pandemic exacerbated these inequities
- The Closing the Digital Divide Project that was implemented in our district
 - Including partners
 - Some evaluation results
 - Feedback from participants and partners on the impact of the project

Summary of Project Timelines

- Launched October 2020
- The project had 4 intake phases due to funding and pandemic uncertainty
- Devices and a form of connectivity service (data plan or prepaid phone until the end of March 2022)
- Devices only until inventory exhausted May 2022
- Final wave = microgrant initiative



The DD project launched in October 2020

There were different phases of the project, and at times application intake was paused due to lack of funding. We applied to other grants and supported others to apply for funds.

Then as a result of partnership connections and dialogue, DTSSAB became aware of the need and positive comments on the project and was able to direct funds towards the pilot, allowing us to extend the project.

Those who received devices in the earlier phases of initiative had their plan payment extended.

In the later phase of the project, prepaid phones were used and eventually only devices were provided as restrictions were easing and spring/summer approached to support connecting outdoors and accessing Wi-Fi elsewhere.

Final phase included provision of microgrants which I'll share more detail on in a bit.

Project Evaluation

- Process evaluation

- January 2021

- Outcome Evaluation

- March 2022



We conducted a process evaluation during the first wave of the project. This allowed us to hear from partners early on and make changes to the process based on their feedback.

As the project was winding down, we had a practicum student prepare an outcome evaluation proposal for this project which then guided our main evaluation work.

Data was gathered from the initial applications that were submitted, as well as through evaluation surveys that were issued to both clients and referral partners.

I'll share a few results now.

Evaluation Results

Overall Project Applicants:

- 46.6% were 50 years of age or older
- 83.0% made less than \$25,000 per year

From the applications we received, we determined that 46.6% of project applicants were 50 years of age or older, and that 83.0% of project applicants made less than \$25,000 per year.

Please rank the following questions by your level of agreement with the statement:

■ Strongly Agree
 ■ Agree
 ■ Neither Agree nor Disagree
 ■ Disagree
 ■ Strongly Disagree
 ■ Don't Know



We asked referral partners about how this project supported their clients.

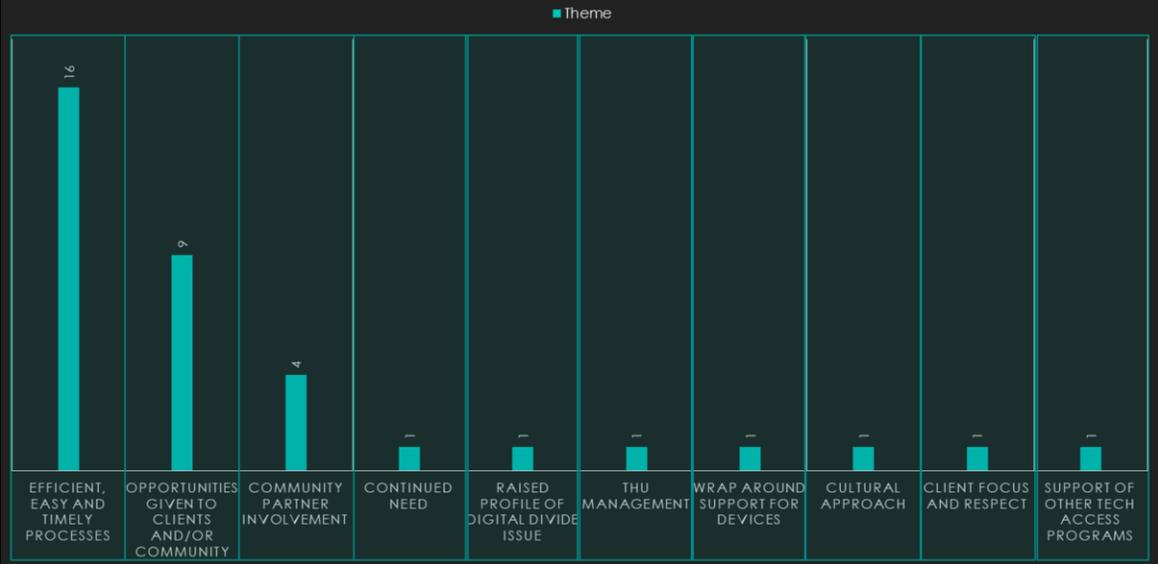
Over 80% indicated their clients were supported:

- Accessing internet connected devices
- Accessing connectivity supports
- Accessing continued learning opportunities and health services and programs (including mental health services)

And over 60% of partners agreed that the project supported clients in:

- Securing or maintaining a job / employment
- Accessing health and well-being information
- Applying for financial support

Please describe any factors that you feel contributed to project success:

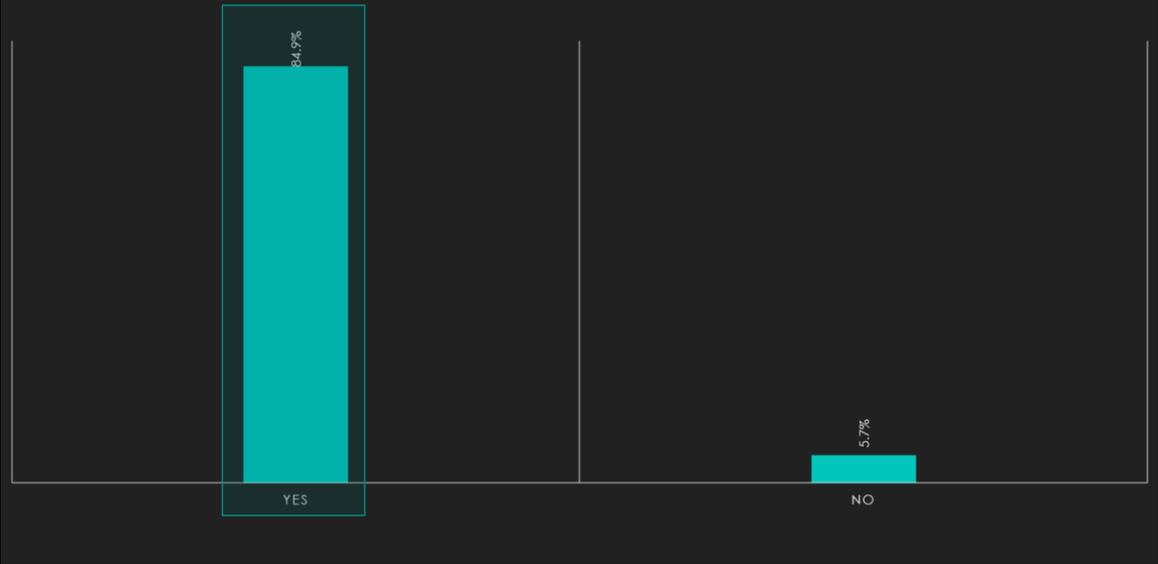


We also asked referral partners to describe factors they felt contributed to project success.

They told us 3 main things:

- The process was efficient, easy and timely (comments on the ease of application process, the acceptance rate, and the speed of service for the project)
- Increased opportunities for clients (i.e. enhanced communication, better access to mental health services, connecting with others during the pandemic, and access to financial aid).
- Positive comments on community partner involvement and the importance of teamwork

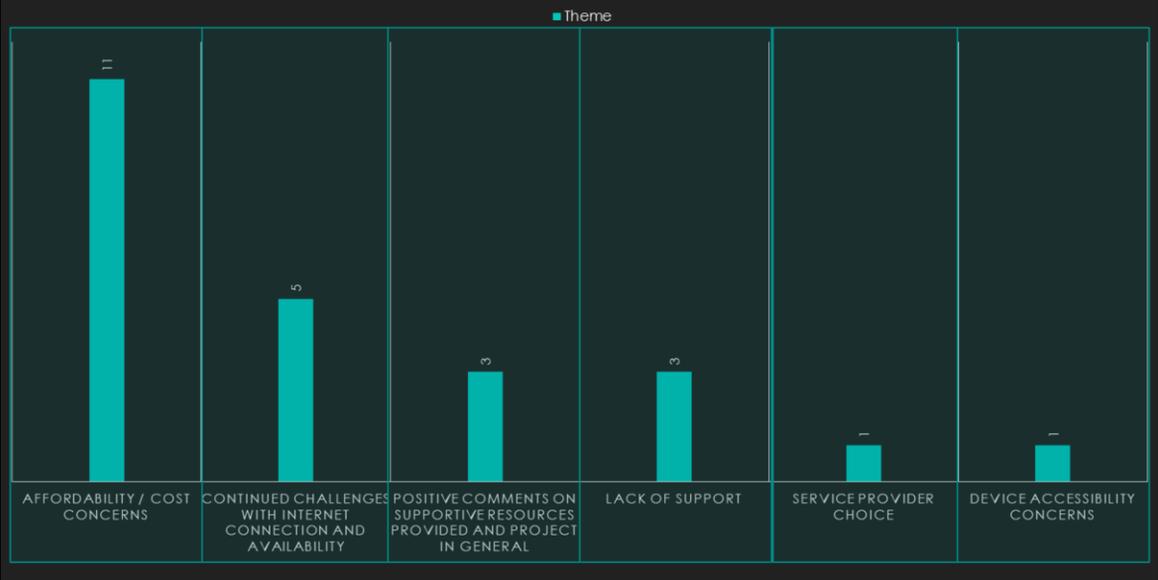
Once the project is done, do you think you will continue to use the device you received?



We asked clients to identify their intention of continuing to use the device they received once the project had ended.

A large majority of clients (85%) indicated that they planned to continue to use their device once the project was done. – so they'd either purchase a data package if possible, or use local free public Wi-Fi.

What challenges to accessing and using online technology do you think you will face after the Digital Divide project has ended?



Next, clients were asked about the barriers to digital inclusion that they may face in the future. Themes included:

- Affordability / cost concerns such as challenges relating to the continuing costs required for data/internet plans.
- Continued challenges with Internet Connection and Availability
- There were positive comments on supportive resources provided and project in general
- Lack of support (noting the potential difficulties clients may face in accessing and using online technology due to a lack of support in the future).

Microgrants

- City of Temiskaming Shores Public Library
- Pavilion Women's Centre
- Employment Options
- Centre d'éducation des adultes de New Liskeard
- Armstrong Township Public Library
- Timiskaming Child Care
- Canadian Mental Health Association Timiskaming Branch
- Englehart Public Library
- Matachewan First Nation

The final phase of the project involved a local microgrant initiative where community organizations that serve individuals who experience low income and/or face significant barriers to accessing technology could apply for up to \$5,000 to maintain or expand an aspect of the program,

The following organizations were successful in their applications. And you can see the specific details of the projects they'll be implementing on page 4 of the Briefing Note.

Key Actions for THU

- Continue to bring partners together to discuss mitigating health and well-being disparities in Timiskaming;
- Strengthen local advocacy efforts to support legislative changes that aid the development of timely, quality, affordable digital infrastructure in rural and remote areas in Timiskaming;
- Continue to connect community members with pre-existing cyber safety resources;
- Support digital health literacy in the population and promote digital literacy skills training opportunities, including connecting to existing local resources and services;
- Continue to work with community partners to address digital equity including awareness of the issue, healthy public policy, and supportive environments.

Digital equity is a key social determinant of health. As such, THU will continue to work in the following areas with our community partners.

Key Actions for Municipal and Provincial Officials

- Support strategies that fast-track the advancement of digital equity and keep everyone connected through quality, affordable Internet and digital technology and services.
- Support policies that increase competition and lower barriers for Internet providers and increasing access to rural Internet subsidy programs for small to medium Internet Service Providers.
- Advocate for all levels of government to increase accessibility, availability, and quality of subsidized Internet programs.
- Support collaboration between government, non-profit organizations, and the private sector to provide tailored, low-cost, culturally relevant digital literacy training opportunities to those most impacted by the digital divide.

It's important to note that rural and remote areas in Canada have less access to high quality Internet services and often pay more for lower quality services. Data shows that median Internet upload speeds for rural users are consistently 10 times slower than urban speeds.

With the provincial election just behind us and municipal elections coming up soon, THU is bringing focus to this issue in the form of election primers and asks such as these.

Conclusion

- Overall, the project addressed the digital divide during the COVID-19 pandemic
- 400+ individual clients
- 700+ people helped in total
- Band-Aid solution

Overall, the results of our evaluation indicate that the project was successful in addressing the digital divide and reducing the severity of this issue during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through this project we were able to provide devices and services to over 400 unique clients and an estimated 700 household members in total.

Referral partners and clients have expressed again and again how much this has project has meant to them.

However, we are very well aware that this project was a band-aid solution to a high need time that was reliant on one-time funding.

Future collaborative work among all levels of government, the private sector and community organizations will still be needed to bridge the digital divide.

Thank You

Questions?