

Rural connectivity

Photo Credit: Richard Margolese

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Access to sufficient internet connection is an ongoing issue for those living in rural communities across the globe. As we have moved into a more digital age, those without access to sufficient internet connectivity are often left behind in a variety of ways. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission declared broadband internet access to be a basic utility (Kupfer, 2016). People are unable to connect with family or friends, keep up to date on important news, run a small business, successfully participate in online learning and, learn of social opportunities in their communities, access telehealth services, among several others. In addition, some older adults have the added obstacle of being unfamiliar with many of the devices and certain social platforms such as Facebook leaving them even more socially isolated than those simply without internet connection. A study done by the PEW Research Center revealed that 41% of seniors (ages 65+) do not use the internet at all, 53% do not have broadband internet access at home and 23% do not use cellphones (Smith, 2014). This study further reinforces both the need for greater access to broadband internet access and the encouragement and teaching of seniors to learn more about the technology around them.

Broadband internet access has been declared a basic utility for all Canadians.

Township of Ramara, Ontario

The rural Township of Ramara, Ontario has recently improved their internet access in coordination with Xplornet Communications Inc. Xplornet built **3 new internet towers and upgraded five existing towers in 2020, bringing speeds of up to 50 mbps with unlimited data to 5700 rural residents, businesses and First Nations communities.** The Township of Ramara dedicated a one-time modernization transfer from the Government of Ontario to this project, in addition to receiving funding from SWIFT (Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology), a not-for-profit broadband expansion project. (Township of Ramara, 2020).



Photo Credit: Xplornet

Figure 1: Rob Bell Lake tower

Canada North Fibre Loop

The Canada North Fibre Loop is a project that was announced in 2018 **“that will strengthen internet, cellular and other telecommunication services for those living in the Yukon, Northwest Territories (NWT) and Nunavut”** (NorthwesTel, 2020). The network will consist of 3 different fibre networks

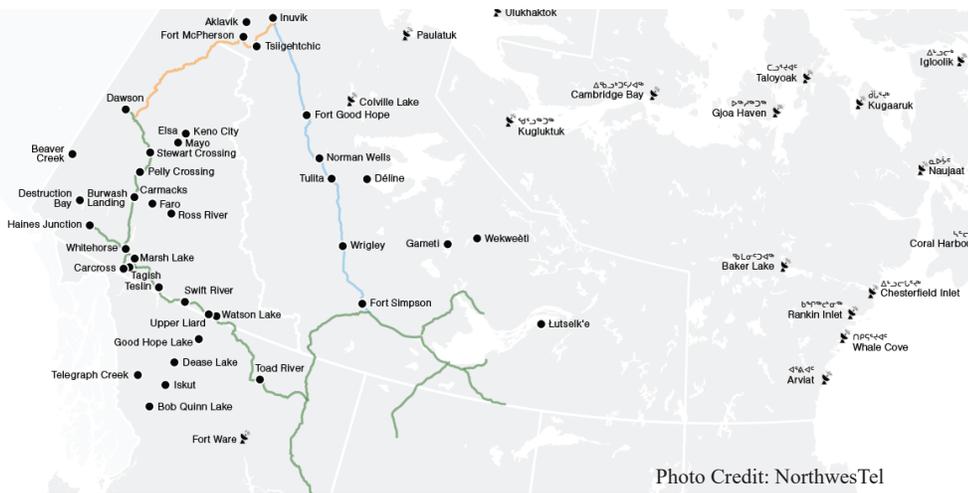


Figure 2: Map of Canada North Fibre Loop (CNFL)

owned by the Government of Yukon, Government of NWT and NorthwesTel. The fibre line owned by the Government of Yukon will go along the Dempster Highway and be operated by NorthwesTel, this particular line was funded by the Yukon government, the Government of Canada and NorthwesTel. The Mackenzie Valley Fibre Link launched in 2017 and is owned by the Government of NWT. The third line of the loop is solely owned by NorthwesTel and brings up to 100 gbps capacity to northern British Columbia, Alberta, the Yukon and Northwest Territories. **One special thing to note is that this loop will be a redundant fibre network meaning that any disruptions in one portion of the line will not interrupt other customers.** (NorthwesTel, 2020).

Social isolation as a public health concern.

Tech Allies, Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly, San Francisco

Tech Allies is a program ran by the Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly organization in the San Francisco and Bay area. The entire organization aims to call social isolation a public health concern and reduce loneliness among older adults. It is a volunteer-run organization and prides itself on its culturally diverse group of Elders. **The Tech Allies program matches volunteers with Elders and provides in-home training on how to use a digital tablet. Elders go through an 8-week training course with their volunteers covering the basics and essentials of using a tablet device.** (Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly, n.d.).



Figure 3: Tech Allies Graduate

The Gadget Guides, the Greater Toronto Area

The Gadget Guides is a company based out of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) started by a group of university students, inspired by their grandparents living far away in other countries. **Their main goal is to make technology friendly for all users, and much of their focus is on helping seniors. Members of their team will go directly to a customer’s home and spend one-on-one time with them, teaching them how to use any type of digital device.** They have trained instructors that

Making technology friendly for all.

Figure 4: Full class session at Four Elms Retirement Home.



Photo Credit: The Gadget Guides

Figure 5: Senior learning how to use laptop.



Photo Credit: The Gadget Guides

can start with the simple basics such as turning on the device to more advanced actions such as using different social media platforms and everything in between. They have also teamed up with several retirement centres and community centres in the GTA, going to each and hosting group classes for seniors to participate in. They pride themselves on being the most affordable choice; noting that their rates are 50% lower than those of the leading competitors. So far they have helped 356 satisfied clients, 195 of which are seniors. (The Gadget Guides, 2017).

Final Thoughts



Photo Credit: Township of Ramara

Figure 6: Xplornet breaking ground in the Township of Ramara

After reviewing these four precedents, it is clear that broadband internet access is a crucial, basic utility that all people should have in their homes, towns and cities. As the world continues to rely on digital technology for many aspects of daily life, the importance of sufficient internet connection is clear. The Government of Canada has launched a Connect to Innovate program that will provide funding to rural communities across the country to upgrade current services or install new services ensuring sufficient internet connection in these areas (Government of Canada, 2018), and many countries across the world have done the same. Town by town, city by city, the world is moving towards being fully connected, as seen in the precedents of the Township of Ramara and the Canada North Fibre Loop. The other side of this precedent study is the digital divide that exists between seniors and current technology, they are falling behind and finding themselves more and more socially isolated. This is particularly exacerbated if a senior is living in a rural community, that scenario would create an unfair amount of obstacles. Programs like Tech Allies and the Gadget Guides are slowly bridging the gap for those seniors that are unfamiliar with certain digital devices, ensuring that they have the means and knowledge to remain in the social fold and connected with family, friends, news, telehealth services and so on.

Sources:

Government of Canada. (2018, October 10). Funding to bring high-speed internet for Canadians in rural and remote communities-Overview. Retrieved March 03, 2021, from <https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/119.nsf/eng/00002.html>

This Government of Canada resource speaks to the Connect to Integrate program funded by the federal government that is helping rural communities improve upon on gain access to broadband internet access.

Kupfer, M. (2016). Canada's telecom regulator declares broadband internet access a basic service | CBC News. CBC. Retrieved 2 March 2021, from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/crtc-internet-essential-service-1.3906664>

This CBC article by Kupfer speaks to the declaration of broadband internet access as a basic service that all Canadians should have access to.

Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly. (n.d.) Tech Allies. Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly - San Francisco Chapter. Retrieved 2 March 2021, from <http://littlebrotherssf.org/tech-allies/>

This website outlines the Tech Allies program ran by the Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly out of the San Francisco and bay area.

Northwestel. (2020). Canada North Fibre Loop. Northwestel. Retrieved 2 March 2021, from <https://www.nwtel.ca/community/canada-north-fibre-loop-0>

This website article refers to the Canada North Fibre Loop project that was launched in 2018 to bring stronger internet, cellular and other telecommunications to the territories, in addition to northern Alberta and British Columbia. The article speaks to the 3 different fibre lines that will make up the loop and how each is owned and funded differently. It also speaks to the importance of bringing improved fibre optic connectivity to the region.

Smith, A. (2014, April 3). Older Adults and Technology Use. Retrieved March 03, 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/04/03/older-adults-and-technology-use/>

This article presented findings on a study put out by the Pew Research Centre on older adults and technology use. The results showed that though older adults have made great strides in adopting to technology and internet use, they still lag behind in a number of variables shown throughout the study.

The Gadget Guides. (2017). Making Technology Friendly. Retrieved March 03, 2021, from <http://thegadgetguides.com/>

This website outlines the Gadget Guides business ran out of the Greater Toronto Area that is teaching technology to the community; they have had much success in the last 5-6 years and continue to focus much of their efforts on reaching seniors.

Township of Ramara. (2020). Xplornet Enhances Internet Services in Ramara. Ramara.ca. Retrieved 2 March 2021, from <https://www.ramara.ca/en/news/xplornet-enhances-internet-services-in-ramara.aspx>

The Township of Ramara website spoke to the services that Xplornet brought in to the community in 2020. The article speaks to what was done, the timeline, allows for FAQ and provided more details on certain funding that was required for the project.