

Extending the line: the First Nations Telehealth Expansion Project

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Although telehealth has been around for many years, its expansion to First Nations and Inuit communities is a novel endeavour. The First Nations Telehealth Expansion Project was created to eliminate some of the obstacles First Nations people experience as part of living in isolation, partially bridging the gap between First Nations and non-First Nations Canadians. The purpose of the project was to improve First Nations health care by providing better access to clinical services and improving education, focusing specifically on mental health and addiction, maternal health and management of diabetes and chronic disease.¹ This multimillion-dollar venture was initiated by the BC Ministry of Health, the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) and Canada Health Infoway, and has been divided into 2 stages or waves.²

Wave 1 began in January 2015. The objective was to expand telehealth to more than 45 First Nations communities throughout British Columbia.³ The first expansion focused on education and administration, as well as clinical services.³ In the summer of 2015, the FNHA reported that 18 additional rural communities had been added to the telehealth network since the start of the expansion.⁴ One of the many barriers these isolated communities face is the lack of adequate infrastructure needed to support a functional telehealth system.⁵ Many of the communities that joined the network had to first improve their Internet connectivity to enable the telehealth communication system to function properly with minimal lag. Currently, the FNHA is in the process of securing funding for the second wave of expansion in 2016. There has already been interest from 20 other rural communities in BC, and Canada

Health Infoway has invested \$4.5 million in the project.^{2,4}

The project also focuses on upgrading previously existing telehealth services. These upgrades include deploying and implementing better equipment setup, as was done in Fort Babine.⁴ New equipment may include cameras with higher resolution and additional supplemental devices, such as stethoscopes, portable ultrasonography machines and ophthalmoscopes. Ultimately, the project aims to meet the targets described in *The Transformative Change Accord: First Nations Health Plan*, with the hope of creating a “fully integrated clinical telehealth network” for the First Nations people of BC.⁶

Although this project is not a solution to the current problems in health service delivery in rural communities in northern BC, it is a step in the right direction. By expanding telehealth to First Nations communities in the northwest, Canada is moving toward equalizing health care to all its citizens and making it accessible.

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