

# BC First Nations Communities Welcomes Telehealth to Improve and Expand Access to Local Health Care

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The British Columbia Alliance on Telehealth Policy and Research (BCATPR) explored how and where telehealth interventions may best meet the health care needs of First Nations living on reserves within British Columbia and considered contextual issues as well as potential direct and indirect benefits.

## BACKGROUND

In British Columbia, 96 of the 105 First Nations reserves that are funded and/or served by the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada have limited access to community-based secondary and tertiary prevention interventions. Telehealth is increasingly portrayed as an effective way to improve access to primary health care in British Columbia's First Nations communities.

The objective of this project was to develop an appropriate framework assessing the feasibility, sustainability and suitability of Telehealth/e-health interventions on First Nations reserves in BC. A systematic review of grey and published literature and face-to-face interviews with cultural knowledge keepers to inform on the development of a cultural framework for a draft discussion paper were conducted.

Full report is available at [www.bcatpr.ca/publicationsandreports](http://www.bcatpr.ca/publicationsandreports).

## KEY FINDINGS

- Priority areas for telehealth deployment include mental health and youth suicide prevention programs, chronic disease prevention, pilot projects integrating acute care and community health services for First Nations, and the training of First Nations health care professionals.
- Discussion with a group of Elders revealed that they would welcome telehealth as an opportunity to improve and expand access to care locally, and to build on local assets, including local professionals, traditional knowledge and traditional medicine, and family members.
- The review of the telehealth literature suggests that telehealth interventions may be used successfully for triage, diagnosis and referrals. Telehomecare, chronic disease management and mental health are telehealth service areas deserving attention.
- Despite the key finding that telehealth service options must be built and integrated into the First Nations community health care system, we found few studies that could inform the deployment of these services into First Nations communities. No studies documented how telehealth had impacted the local workforce.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Additional research is required to determine a wide range of the most appropriate modalities (both synchronous and asynchronous) for specific applications. Telehealth should integrate into local health services where monetary ventures in First Nations community-based healthcare services are required to ensure sustainability. The services must be fully imbedded in the daily care processes, and must be properly assessed within a regular budgetary framework. Improving linkages between on and off-reserve services is recommended to increase opportunities for cultural support and improve continuity of care.

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