

**Virtual Community Mental Health and Addiction Services  
(Adult, Child and Youth)  
Interim Guidance to Community Mental Health Agencies**

*March 31, 2020*

**Context:**

As the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to evolve locally and globally, the Government of Ontario continues to take decisive action to respond to COVID-19 to help contain its spread and to protect the public. This has involved some unprecedented measures and many of you continue to undertake great efforts to protect your families, friends, neighbours, clients and patients, and communities.

Based on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, the Ministry of Health (ministry), in partnership with Ontario Health, is recommending increased use of virtual care in an effort to limit person to person contact in community mental health and addictions care, where it is appropriate.

**Purpose and Scope:**

The ministry is advising community mental health and addictions, supportive housing and child and youth mental health service providers to immediately take steps to rapidly expand the virtual delivery of community mental health and addiction services.

Increased virtual care is expected to:

- Support provincial public health self-isolation and social distancing efforts in a way that minimizes disruption to patient care.
- Support the delivery of community mental health and addiction services.

The ministry is recommending that community mental health and addiction service providers utilize virtual delivery of care, where feasible in order to maintain service continuity, given that a reduction in service could result in: increased risk of harm to clients or others; lowered compliance with medications and treatment plans; and/or increase in symptoms, relapses and overdoses, which would place further pressure on the healthcare system.

**Virtual Care Delivery:**

Virtual care delivery includes the meaningful communication of a patient's mental health and addictions status and/or the treatment/intervention needed to support their care needs.

Virtual care includes:

- Phone calls;
- Video conferencing;
- Secure messaging; and/or
- Remote monitoring.

Community mental health and addictions service providers should scale up existing, proven virtual care models where they exist.

**Implementation:**

- **Technology:** Community mental health and addiction providers may leverage existing virtual care technologies, including those provided through the Ontario Telemedicine Network (OTN), to support virtually delivered care. Service providers would need to engage with their clients and caregivers to determine whether they could leverage client-owned devices to support virtual care.

To support virtually delivered care, individuals and organizations that are existing OTN members can sign up for an OTNhub account, which allows access to the secure OTN network from an individual’s personal laptop or other compatible device through personal computer video-conferencing (PCVC). Community-based mental health and addictions service providers may sign up for an OTNhub account by doing the following (See *attached for more detailed instructions*):

- Physicians at organizations that currently have access to OTN can self-enroll individually to acquire access through the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario’s website.
- For non-physicians, organizations that are existing OTN members can onboard more PCVC users on behalf of their mental health professionals through self set-up.

**Notes:**

- Individuals will require a ONE ID through eHealth in order to register for OTNHub/PCVC. Instructions for how to register for a ONE ID are attached. If providers continue to have questions, please reach out to Steve Mathew, Provincial Lead Mental health and Addictions at OTN by email at [smathew@otn.ca](mailto:smathew@otn.ca).
- If more than fifty percent of your organization’s total operating budget is provided by the Ministry of Health, your organization may qualify for additional OTNhub accounts/PCVC licenses at no extra charge to your organization. If your organization has multiple funding sources, you may add additional PCVC licenses at a cost of \$175 per license plus HST. Expenses for PCVC

licenses, if applicable, should be tracked separately as part of your organization's COVID-19 related spending.

For the service providers that are not currently OTN members but require urgent access to telemedicine for counseling, follow up or other mental health and addictions services, please reach out to your ministry contact or Program Supervisor to request access.

In the interim for those service providers that do not currently have access to OTN, other virtual platforms are available to support virtually delivered care. As an example, OntarioMD and the Ontario Medical Association have created a list of tools that health care providers might consider in supporting clients during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may also be useful for mental health and addictions service providers (for more information use the following web link: <https://ontariomd.news/#>). Other platforms outside of this list, including zoom, are also available to organizations to deliver virtual care. All service providers are encouraged to contact vendors directly for product-specific questions.

The Child and Youth Tele-Mental Health Service also continues to be available to support service providers working with children, youth and families. The Tele-Mental Health Service provides publicly funded, community-based child and youth mental health service providers access to psychiatric consultation, via videoconferencing and without the need for a primary care referral. The Child and Youth Tele-Mental Health Service is also available for education and training seminars for community child and youth mental health professionals. Typically, the Child and Youth Tele-Mental Health Service is available for service providers in rural, remote and underserved communities and in limited urban settings, however, given the increased demand for virtual options for the delivery of mental health and addictions services, the Service will **temporarily be made available to any child and youth mental health service provider in the province**, including in urban settings. Note the Service will continue to be available only for children and youth at this time. Referral forms can be found on the SickKids TeleLink website using the following link: <http://www.sickkids.ca/tele-link/Referral-Forms/TeleMental-Health-Services/TeleMental-Health-Referral-Forms.html> (copy and paste the full link into your browser).

- **Privacy and consent:** Like all community mental health and addiction services, virtual delivery must continue to comply with consent and privacy requirements outlined in the *Personal Health Information Protection Act, 2004* (PHIPA) and the *Health Care Consent Act, 1996*. In situations where providers are working from home or other non-standard

locations, they must ensure that virtual communication is done in a private setting (unless in emergency situations).

### **Other Resources**

To support virtual health care delivery, please see attached, guidelines, toolkits and resources compiled by Children’s Mental Health Ontario and The Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (at the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario). A list of resources that are available in French is also attached. Online training and best practice resources related to virtual care is also available through OTN’s website (for more information, use the following web link: <https://training.otn.ca/course/view.php?id=4>).

Also attached are examples of draft policies/procedures for e-mental health services and guidance/considerations for e-mental health service delivery developed by two child and youth mental health lead agencies. These draft resources are not meant to be used as templates but rather as examples that other agencies might consider as they develop their own policies and procedures.

The ministry is aware of the existing efforts of the mental health and addictions service providers to maintain service continuity, including through virtual service delivery, in these unprecedented times. The ministry is committed to working with you to prioritize access to virtual care options for service, wherever it is feasible to do so.

For more information related to COVID-19, please check out the Government of Ontario’s websites, which are updated regularly, using the links below:

- MOH COVID-19 General Information: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/2019-novel-coronavirus>
- Ontario Website: <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/>