

Understanding the Impacts of Compass Community Services' TeleConnect Program

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Introduction

Compass Community Services (CCS) provides a range of mental health and social support services to the Guelph–Wellington community and the surrounding area. One unique, free service offered by CCS is the TeleConnect program, an outbound call service providing emotional support, socialization, wellness checks, medication reminders, motivation, and assistance with accessing resources to isolated community members on a daily basis. Anyone across Guelph–Wellington and surrounding areas can register to receive up to three daily telephone calls from trained volunteers at no cost. The TeleConnect client pool is a diverse population, ranging from youth to older adults and people who experience mental and physical illnesses, addiction, homelessness, abuse, isolation, and more. Most referrals for TeleConnect come from health care providers who are unable to provide the level of support required by clients.

In early 2023, CCS partnered with the Research Shop, part of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI) at the University of Guelph, to determine the impact of TeleConnect on the community. The aim of the collaboration is to have evidence-based research to help evaluate and verify the impact of TeleConnect on the community of Guelph–Wellington. To achieve these goals, the researchers conducted surveys with TeleConnect clients, community health partners, and CCS staff and volunteers. The data collected from these surveys are presented in this report.

Background

There has been a significant increase in the demand for emergency resources and for the time of first responders. In 2022, Guelph–Wellington Paramedic Services completed over 30,000 calls – an increase of 8% from 2021 (Kozolank, 2023; Dewar, 2023). Alternative community health programs are one way to potentially reduce the need for accessing 911 services in Guelph and Wellington County (Dewar, 2023).

The TeleConnect program is an innovative alternative community health program, completing 34,500 calls with clients from 2022–2023. Complementary and alternative community health programs provide services complementing mainstream health care services and medicine. These services can overcome cost barriers to community care (Herman et al., 2005; Reed et al., 2019), reduce hospital admissions (Benthien et al., 2020), and can be beneficial for community mental health and wellbeing outcomes (Wye et al., 2009). There is a growing body of evidence in Canada that demonstrates that community-based mental wellbeing programs are both effective in helping clients address health-related challenges, and cost effective (Moroz et al., 2020). TeleConnect provides critical support to Guelph–Wellington community members and fills key service gaps that may positively contribute to an overall reduction in calls to and use of emergency services.



Methods

This project collected quantitative and qualitative data from surveys. TeleConnect clients were mailed surveys that included a paper survey to be returned to CCS via mail, as well as an option to complete the survey online (via a provided link to an online survey) and an option for a phone interview. All client participants chose to complete a mail-in survey. All CCS volunteers, staff, interns, and community partners who responded chose to complete an online survey. The surveys were different for each group to understand their diverse perspectives on the impact of TeleConnect.

The surveys were designed by the research team with feedback from CCS staff. Ethical research protocols were followed in the design and administration of the survey, and information about the project and participant consent was included at the beginning of each survey. Data collection took place from March 2023 to April 2023.

Recruitment and participation details are as follows:

- Clients:
 - 101 surveys were mailed to program clients; 54 surveys were completed.
- Staff/volunteers:
 - 79 staff/volunteers/interns were provided with a link to the online survey; 39 surveys were completed.
- Community partners:
 - 6 community partner organizations were provided with a link to the online survey; 10 surveys were completed.

Data Analysis

All participant data was collected anonymously. Project data was stored in Microsoft Teams, a secure password-protected platform administered through the University of Guelph. Quantitative data obtained from surveys was analyzed using descriptive statistics in Qualtrics and Excel. Open-ended survey responses were coded in Excel, and two researchers conducted thematic analysis to determine key themes. Data was initially coded by one researcher, then reviewed by the other researcher. Final codes were then developed collaboratively by two researchers based on their initial data analysis. A codebook was created to document recurring themes.



Results

TeleConnect Clients

Sample Characteristics of Clients

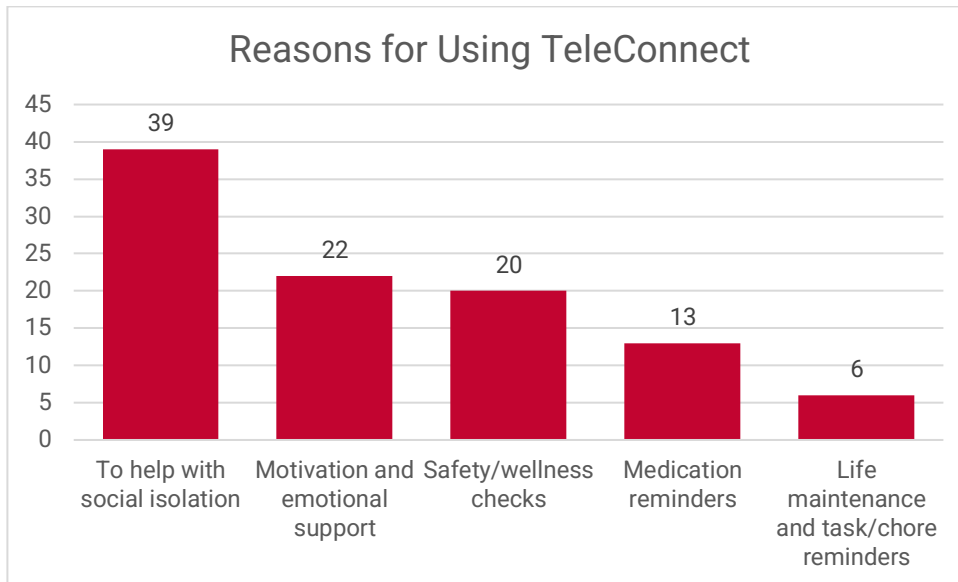
The following provides a breakdown of the sample characteristics of participants who used the TeleConnect service (n=54) at the time of the survey.

- 43% (n=23) of participants were 71 years old or older, 31% (n=20) were between 51–70 years, 11% (n=6) were between 18–30 years, and 9% (n=5) were between 31–50 years.
- 52% (n=28) of participants identified as a woman, 43% (n=20) identified as a man, and 6% (n=3) identified as non-binary.
- 88% (n=50) of participants included white/European in their ethnic background, 5% (n=3) included Southeastern Asian, 4% (n=2) included Latin American, 2% (n=1) included Black/African/Caribbean, and 2% (n=1) included Arab. Participants were able to select multiple ethnic backgrounds.
- 54% (n=29) of participants lived in Wellington County, 27% (n=16) lived in the City of Guelph, and 17% (n=9) lived in another region. These regions included South Gate, Hamilton, Kitchener, Blue Mountain, and Mount Forest.
- Most participants lived alone (77%, n=40), 15% (n=8) lived in a private house/apartment with other people, and 8% (n=4) lived in supportive housing or an independent retirement community.
- Lastly, 48% (n=25) of participants had used TeleConnect for one year or more, 31% (n=16) had used TeleConnect for six months to one year, and 21% (n=11) had used TeleConnect for less than 6 months.

Reasons for Using TeleConnect

Clients were asked about their reasons for using TeleConnect. They were able to choose multiple responses; 100 responses were collected and are displayed in Figure 1. 39 participants reported that they used TeleConnect to help reduce their social isolation. 22 reported that they used TeleConnect for motivation and emotional support, while 20 indicated that they used TeleConnect for safety/wellness checks, 13 for medication reminders, and six for life maintenance and task/chore reminders.

Figure 1: Reasons clients use TeleConnect.

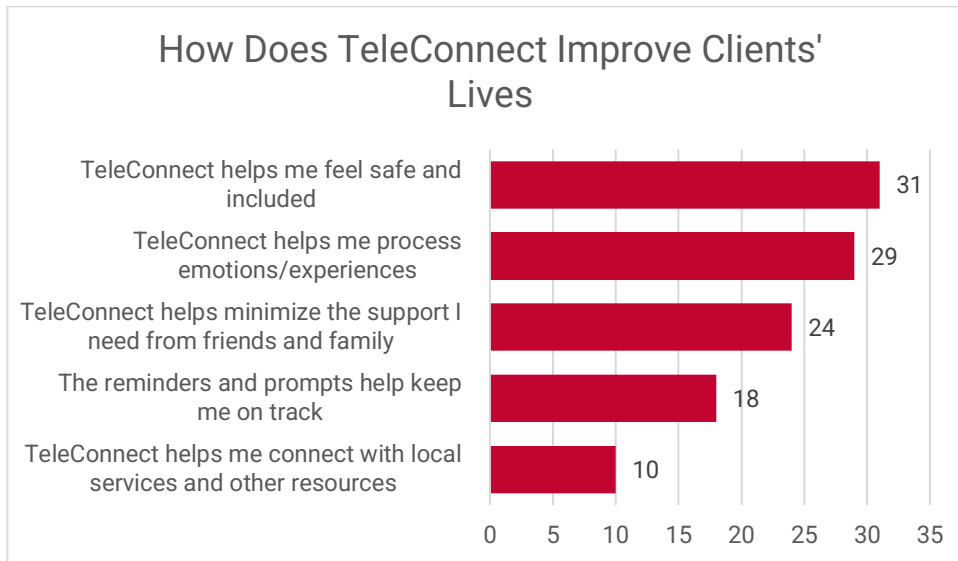


TeleConnect Client Impact

Clients were asked to rate on a scale of 1–5 the impact that TeleConnect has had on their health and wellbeing, where 1=no impact and 5=great impact. The average of these responses was 4.22, suggesting that most participants found that TeleConnect had a highly positive impact on their health and wellbeing.

Similarly, participants were asked to share the ways that TeleConnect has impacted their lives. They were able to choose multiple responses; 118 responses were collected and are displayed in Figure 2. 31 participants reported that TeleConnect helped them feel safe and included. 29 participants found that TeleConnect helped them process emotions/experiences. 24 participants shared that TeleConnect minimized the support needed from friends and family, 18 that the reminders and prompts helped keep them on track, and 10 that TeleConnect connected them with local services and other resources.

Figure 2: How TeleConnect has improved clients' lives.



Clients were also given the opportunity to share additional ways that TeleConnect improved their lives in a follow-up text field. Four participants shared that the specific time of day that they received the call had a positive impact on their wellbeing. Two participants enjoyed having a call in the morning to start off their day, for example:

I look forward every morning to a call from one of your friendly callers. [It's] a great start to my day!

Two participants shared that their phone call during the afternoon improved their wellbeing because it helped offset the side-effects of their daily medication and lifted their mood. They noted:

[The] reaction of the daily meds I take in the mornings means [I'm] low-energy and depressed most days. Having conversations helps and is stimulating, and [having them in the] afternoon is much better. [It's] good encouragement.

TeleConnect calls can lift my mood and help me to manage chronic pain and give me reminders to take required medication.

Two participants discussed the positive aspects of chatting with another person. One enjoyed talking about nostalgic themes and interests, while another shared that TeleConnect helped them cope with difficult experiences. They reported:

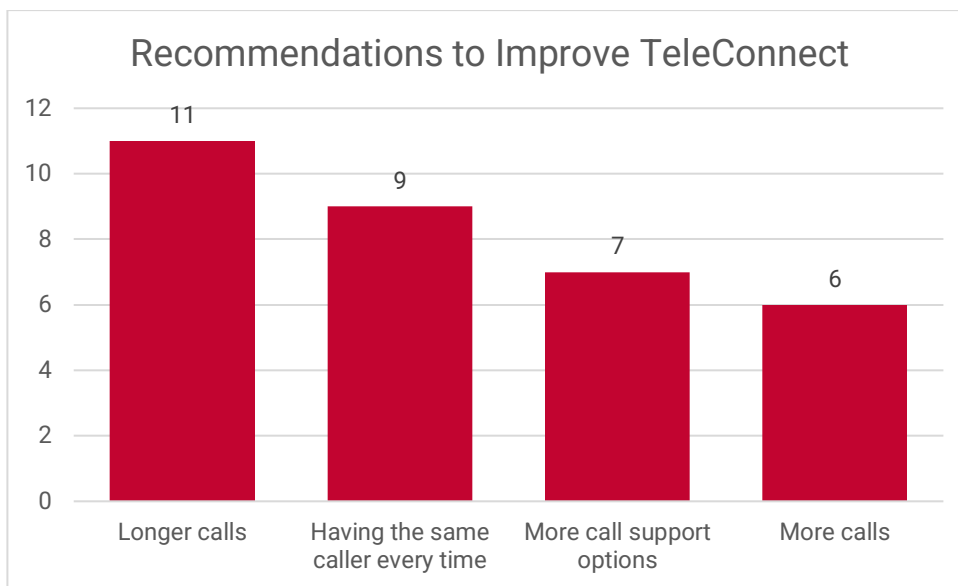
TeleConnect helps me cope when things arise in my life that are difficult. Recently, there have been quite a few [challenges], but I am proud at how well I am doing.

Recommendations for Improving TeleConnect

Overall, participants reported having an excellent experience using TeleConnect. On a scale from 1–5, where 1=not good and 5=excellent, the average rating was 4.68.

Clients were asked whether they had any recommendations to improve the TeleConnect program. 33 participants shared responses (Figure 3), and they were able to provide additional information in a follow-up open-ended question. The main recommendations to improve TeleConnect highlighted by participants included having longer calls (n=11), having the same caller from TeleConnect for each call (n=9), having more call support options such as expanded times of service and length of calls (n=7), having more calls (n=6).

Figure 3: Recommendations to improve TeleConnect.



31 participants provided some qualitative context alongside the survey question above. Eight of these clients responded that they enjoyed the program as is. The main three recommendations from participants were in relation to the callers, the call interactions and discussions, and the call duration.

Six participants suggested recommendations for the TeleConnect callers. Three of these clients responded that they would prefer having different callers phone them. For example, one participant shared:

I like having different voices—[it] means I have more friends.

Alternatively, two participants preferred having the same caller each time because they felt that they had bonded with a specific volunteer. For example:

[One particular volunteer] became my lifeline. I hope she will be here for a long time. I call her my friend; we understand each other so well.



Lastly, one participant recommended having more male callers.

Three clients spoke about the on-call interactions. One participant shared that they hoped for better interactions with callers, suggesting that callers interact more with the clients and ask more questions. Two participants reported that they would prefer volunteers not to get too personal during the call. For example, one participant noted:

Volunteers use self-disclosure too much. Volunteers show emotions too much and I know when they're not having a good day.

Another recommendation related to call duration. Four participants recommended an option for longer calls, with two connecting longer calls to their daily wellbeing. For example:

Sometimes the length of time is flexible, and it seems to work out well for that day and what I am experiencing at that time. [However,] 10 minutes can be too short.

Finally, two participants recommended increasing the number of callers in order to create more time slots with more weekend and morning availability.

Additional Comments

17 clients shared additional comments at the end of the survey in a text field. Seven participants reported their appreciation of the support they receive from the TeleConnect program. They highlighted the positive impact of the TeleConnect volunteers on their daily life. Their comments are reflected in the following quotes:

Everyone that has called has been so amazing. They are so kind and really want to know how you are. Their words are so encouraging and helpful. I am so incredibly grateful for your help and support. Thank you so much.

I cannot say enough how amazing the volunteers are. They really care [and] come across as genuine, caring people; they want to be there to listen [and] to help. They're incredible, [and] their integrity and compassion [are incredible].

Eight participants connected their use of TeleConnect to their wellness. For them, TeleConnect has improved wellness related to depression, sadness, and loneliness. For example, two participants clients shared:

I was in a deep depression before starting with TeleConnect and the volunteers helped bring me out of it. When I feel really low, having the calls brings my mood up and I feel so much more fine than before.

This is a good program for people who live alone. It helps me greatly to start my day not feeling lonely and sad. I'm glad we have this in our community.

Another participant found that TeleConnect lessened the need for healthcare appointments:

[B]y having access to TeleConnect, it has lessened my personal need to make appointments with my family doctor and mental health workers. This service has been a huge positive for me and my wife.

TeleConnect Volunteers and Staff

Sample Characteristics: TeleConnect Callers' Position in the Program

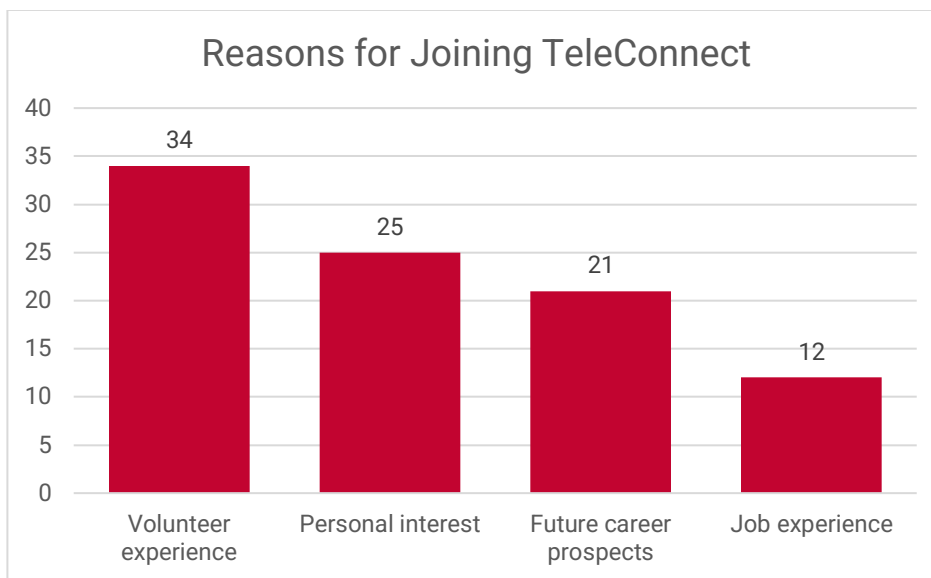
A total of 39 staff, volunteers, and interns participated in the volunteer and staff survey. 84% (n=33) of survey participants were volunteers, 10% (n=4) were staff, and 5% (n=2) were interns. The length of time participants had previously or currently spent in their position varied, with 32% (n=12) of participants in their role for less than 6 months, 32% (n=12) in their role for six months to one year, and 35% (n=13) in their role for one year or more.

Volunteers' and Staff's Personal Experiences

Reasons for Joining the TeleConnect Program

Participants began working or volunteering with TeleConnect for many reasons. The survey provided the option to select multiple answers as to their reason for joining as well as the opportunity for participants to include their own responses. The most common reason reported for joining the TeleConnect program was for volunteer experience, which was selected by 34 participants. Volunteers and staff also reported joining for personal interest (n=25), future career prospects (n=21), and for job experience (n=12).

Figure 4: Reasons for joining TeleConnect.



Other reasons (n=5) identified by participants for joining the TeleConnect program included:

- Gaining experience for graduate school and school placement (n=2);
- Gaining lived experience (n=1);

- Because they want to help people (n=1); and
- Because volunteering is a way to mitigate their own feelings of isolation (n=1).

Personal Impact of Working with TeleConnect

Volunteers and staff were asked about the impact that volunteering or working at TeleConnect has had on their own lives. 18 participants reported personal impacts, and nearly half (n=13) also noted community connection and support as impacts. The following provides some additional context that participants shared about the personal impacts of the TeleConnect program.

12 participants reported that the TeleConnect program provided skill building opportunities in communication and listening, and six participants noted improved confidence. For example, one participant stated:

Being a volunteer with TeleConnect has helped me immensely with gaining a better understanding of the struggles that some people in my local community experience. I've improved my skills in being able to communicate with a diverse array of people, and [I] feel more confident in offering support to other[s] around me as well.

Another participant similarly found that the TeleConnect program has provided opportunities for them to build confidence and develop counselling skills:


[TeleConnect] made me more aware of barriers in the community (lack of affordable housing, long-term counselling options, etc.). It has also enabled me to become more confident speaking to clients who are experiencing various difficulties and to practice my informal counselling skills.

Nine participants found the experience improved their awareness of others (including clients and community members) and themselves. As reported by one participant:

Volunteering with TeleConnect helps me understand to see the bigger picture and to never form conclusions on things without getting [as much] information as possible. A lot of different individuals are dealing with a lot of different things, and it definitely provokes me to never judge anyone as you never know what they are really going through. This experience has taught me that this volunteer experience is something I want to do for as long as I am able to, it is an extremely rewarding and giving experience.

Nine participants found that TeleConnect provided a positive and rewarding experience to help others. For example:

Working at TeleConnect has been such an amazing experience for me. I cannot thank the staff enough for the support and training opportunities that they give us. The community that we connect with through this program always express



how grateful they are for the program and support which gives me immense pride in being a part of such a wonderful organization!

11 participants reported that they were helping others (clients) and had positive experiences giving back to the community. For example, three participants noted that they were happy and “feel good” supporting people in the community who need help. In relation to these personal impacts, 13 participants noted community connection and support as impacts of the program.

Six participants noted that the TeleConnect program has impacted their professional development and provided opportunities for career advancement. Three participants reported that they gained practical experience for future careers. Notably, volunteering with the TeleConnect program has introduced or assisted participants in social work-related career paths, as illustrated by the following response:

Volunteering at TeleConnect has provided me with countless opportunities for personal and professional development. It has allowed me to practice the skills I've learned in school while also teaching me many things school [cannot]. Since working at TeleConnect, I have grown more confident in my abilities as a mental health worker. I believe that without this experience, I would not be ready to peruse a career in social services, but after 7 months at TeleConnect, I am excited to see what opportunities lay ahead.

Support for Volunteers and Staff

The survey investigated support for volunteers, staff, and interns in order to identify opportunities for growth in service provision and to help inform future program strategies. All 34 participants who answered this question reported feeling supported by TeleConnect and CCS. The survey also asked participants how the TeleConnect program had supported them in their role, with 21 responses highlighting staff support to volunteers as well as program structure and training. The following section provides some qualitative context that participants shared about the ways in which TeleConnect supports them in their roles.

Four participants enjoyed the program and their position, and three found that it positively impacts clients and the community. Five participants reported that TeleConnect provides a welcoming, open environment with approachable staff and encourages asking questions and seeking support. Examples of this approachable environment noted by volunteers and staff are highlighted in the following quotes:

I feel less afraid or embarrassed in asking for help or advice when there is a situation that I do not feel equipped to deal with because it is a very welcoming environment.

Staff encourage volunteers to reach out for assistance.

System support and training were also documented by participants as supporting them in their role. Four participants reported that the general structure of the program was supportive, and two participants noted that work accessibility and accommodation within the program assisted them in their duties. Ten participants highlighted the training provided by the program as

supportive, including debriefing sessions, email communications, assistance with difficult client situations, and check-ins.

The role of staff in supporting survey participants in their positions was critical. Two participants noted that CCS staff are deserving of recognition and appreciation. One participant said:

The staff are always available as support while I am volunteering on the lines! I am always appreciated and reminded that I have so many incredible people to learn from.

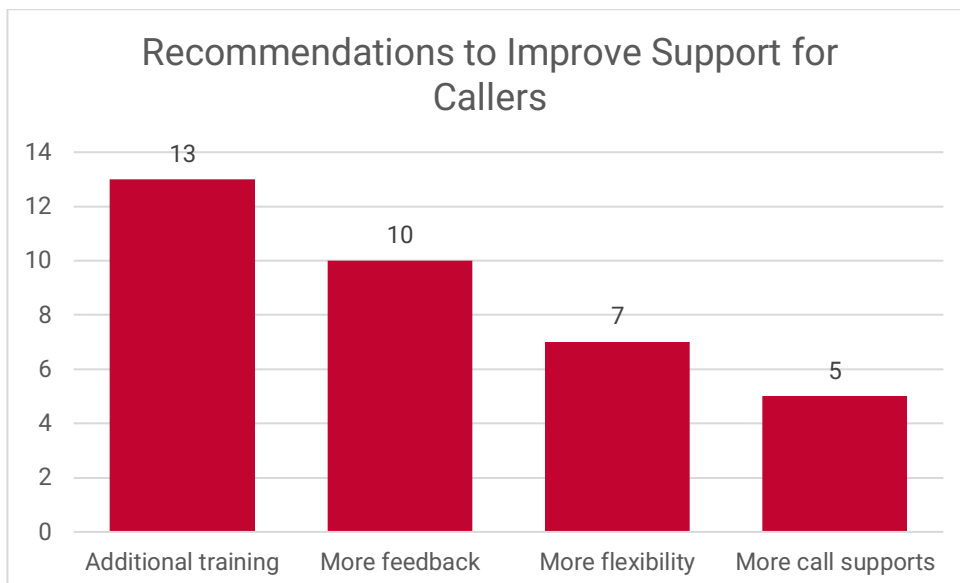
Three participants reported that staff place an emphasis on volunteer needs, wellbeing, and personal life. Seven participants indicated that the TeleConnect program is supportive because staff answer questions and respond to concerns and have the availability to do so. For example, one participant found:


Staff and interns are always available for support, feedback, and to answer questions. Even when you are working on a shift alone, you know that you are never actually alone because there is a staff or intern who is just a message/phone call away.

Similarly, four participants reported that staff provide helpful advice.

To improve current programming, the survey asked volunteers and staff how CCS could assist them to carry out duties more effectively, with the option to select multiple responses (Figure 5). 35 responses were collected. 13 participants recommended additional training, 10 recommended more feedback, seven recommended more flexibility, and five recommended more call support options.

Figure 5: Recommendations to improve support for callers.





Two participants also highlighted that the training, education, flexibility, feedback, positive reinforcement, and support from staff exceeded their expectations and previous job and volunteer experiences. For example:

I personally feel like the training, support, feedback, and flexibility are beyond what I've experienced with any other volunteer program and are why I'm still here over a year later.

Compared to other job situations I have experienced, I am very impressed with the emotional, educational and tech support that I have received from Compass. Staff are very aware of the stresses that can be involved in working the support lines for the various issues that exist in the community. Staff are very good [at providing] positive reinforcement and encouraging volunteers regarding their calls.

Client and Community Impacts Identified by Volunteers and Staff

All participants who answered this question (n=35) reported that they believed that the program has had positive impacts on clients. They were asked to rate on a scale of 1–5 the ways in which they thought the TeleConnect program impacted a client's wellbeing, where 1= not at all and 5= a great deal. The average response for improved mental wellbeing was 4.60, and for physical wellbeing was 3.72, meaning that most participants felt that TeleConnect has a very positive impact on clients' mental and physical wellbeing. Most notably, participants' average rating of TeleConnect providing emotional support was 4.74, meaning that they felt that TeleConnect has had a highly positive impact on emotional support to clients. Further, the average response for TeleConnect filling a service gap was 4.58, indicating that participants similarly found the program to have had a very positive impact in this area.

Lastly, 10 participants indicated "other" positive impacts, with an average rating of 4.60. Other impacts of the TeleConnect program noted by participants included:

- Crisis and suicide prevention and intervention (n=3);
- Addressing isolation and providing a sense of community (n=2);
- Improving client safety (n=1);
- Improving client comfort (n=1); and
- Improving social wellbeing (n=1).

Areas for Improvement

To help inform future strategies and opportunities in the TeleConnect program, the survey asked volunteers and staff about potential areas for improvement, such as service gaps or groups of people not being reached. The main areas for improvement captured in the survey were for volunteers and staff, program coordination and reach, and clients, as outlined below.

Volunteers and staff:

- Additional or specific training; for example, suicide support, text line training, and social skill improvement (n=3).
- Improved volunteer relatability and empathy (n=1).

- Volunteer rewards (n=1).

Program coordination:

- Expansion of the TeleConnect program is necessary and needed to meet the needs of the clients and the community in terms of geographic area, volunteer and staff numbers, marketing and promotion of the program, and audiences reached (n=4).
- The program is at capacity (n=3).
- A lack of funding limits reach and capacity (n=2).

Clients and community:

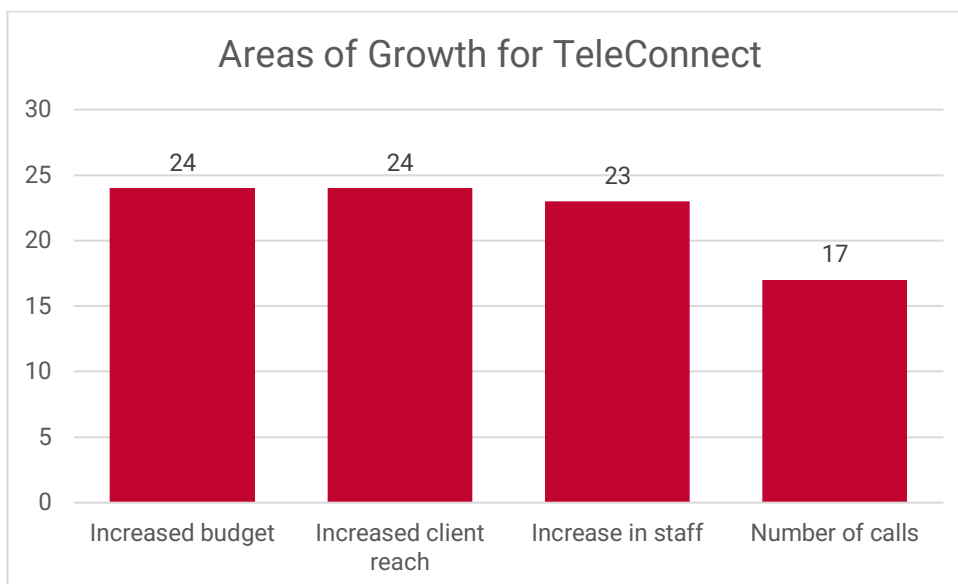
- There are groups of people not being reached, such as youth and younger populations (n=3) and immigrants or migrant workers (n=1).
- Isolation (n=3) and mental health (n=3) are challenges for clients and service provision.
- Clients may misuse or overrely on the program (n=2).
- Younger generations require different or alternative programming (n=2).

Nine participants indicated that they were unsure of areas to improve or did not provide a response.

Areas for Growth

All of the volunteer and staff survey participants indicated that there is room for the TeleConnect program to grow (Figure 6). The main areas for growth of the program highlighted by participants included an increased budget (n=24) and an increase in client reach (n=24), followed by increases in staff (n=23) and the number of calls (n=17).

Figure 6: Areas of growth for TeleConnect.



Three participants shared additional responses and context for other areas of growth, including:

- Increasing the number of volunteers (n=2) and clients served (n=2)

- Expanding services to new demographics (n=1) and locations (n=1)
- Improving awareness of support and media attention (n=1)
- Creating learning opportunities for other agencies to implement similar programs (n=1).

One participant highlighted that these potential areas for growth are largely dependent on the program budget and external funding.

Additional Comments

11 participants shared additional comments about the TeleConnect Program or Compass Community Services. Five participants complemented or highlighted their positive experiences with the program and the impact of community services, while one also highlighted client challenges of overreliance. For example:

This is a great program with a great structure. I do think that at times many clients develop an overreliance on the service and especially on specific staff and volunteers which does not serve their wellbeing in the long term. I think that the program needs to be more aware of these issues and more active in addressing them to benefit client's independence.

Two participants made additional recommendations about how the program could better assist and show appreciation to callers through gift cards and by being more aware of volunteer needs. Two participants expressed gratitude to the staff and management for their support and to the welcoming environment they facilitate. This appreciation extended to the staff's hard work and the recognition they deserve and their support and welcoming attitudes towards volunteers. One participant added that they will continue to volunteer due to this staff support. Two participants added comments about the significant and positive impact of the TeleConnect program on clients' lives, mental health, and wellbeing. They stated:

TeleConnect has saved many lives.

Distress/crisis lines can be difficult to call. Someone may just need another person to talk to but feel they are wasting resources if their situation isn't life or death. TeleConnect is an excellent service because it offers support to those who feel alone. I have known many clients throughout this program that simply have no one else in their life. While we may not be able to fill that hole, TeleConnect eases isolation for these individuals and gives them something to look forward to every day. Everyone needs someone to talk to. I hope that with time, this program is given the opportunity to grow so that more people can feel heard.

Community Partners

Sample Characteristics: Community Partner Occupations and Location

The survey asked community partners about their employment positions and connections to the TeleConnect program. 10 individuals working for community partner organization responded.

- 40% (n=4) of participants worked in the field of paramedicine, including three paramedics and one resource coordinator.

- 20% (n=2) of participants were social workers.
- Other community partners worked in clinical therapy (n=1, 10%), as an intake worker (n=1, 10%), or managed or facilitated programs (n=2, 20%) related to mental health and domestic violence.
- All community partners referred clients to CCS.
- 70% (n=7) of the community partners worked within the city of Guelph, while 10% (n=1) worked within Wellington County, and 20% (n=2) worked in both areas.

TeleConnect Impacts Identified by Community Partners

Impacts on Community Partners' Work

To understand the impact of TeleConnect on the community partners' work, the survey asked participants if the TeleConnect program has reduced their workload or the workload of their coworkers. Five participants responded "yes," one responded "no," and four responded "unsure."

Participants who indicated that TeleConnect reduced their workload and/or the workload of their coworkers shared that the program improved client wellness through medication reminders, social support, and decreasing the risk of crisis and that these factors contribute to a reduction in workload and allow for the reallocation of time to other community members. For example:

They have provided phone calls for med[ication] reminders as well as social calls for our clients. They have also provided mental health supports for our clients. All of these things improve our clients' health which in turn decreases the community paramedics' workload in those areas.

It provides support for traumatized persons and persons with mental health [struggles]. This decreases their presentations in crisis.

One participant who did not find a reduction in their workload due to TeleConnect found that the program provides additional support:

TeleConnect has not impacted my workload; rather, it has provided a valuable resource that supports clients I work with.

Impacts on Clients

Community partners were asked if they believe that the TeleConnect program has had positive impacts on clients in Guelph–Wellington. All of the participants who answered this question agreed that TeleConnect has had positive impacts on clients. Community partners were asked to rate on a scale of 1–5 the perceived impact that the telephone support calls from the TeleConnect program has had on clients' wellbeing, where 1= not at all and 5= a great deal.

- The average response for improved mental wellbeing was 3.89 based on nine responses, meaning that the participants found the program has a positive impact on mental wellbeing.
- For improved physical wellbeing, the average response was 3.17 based on six responses, meaning that the participants found a moderately positive impact on physical wellbeing.

- Participants' average rating of TeleConnect's impact regarding providing emotional support was 4.22 based on nine responses, meaning that the participants found the program provides a lot of emotional support.
- The average response for the program filling a service gap was 4.11 based on nine responses, indicating that the participants found TeleConnect to have a very positive impact in this area.

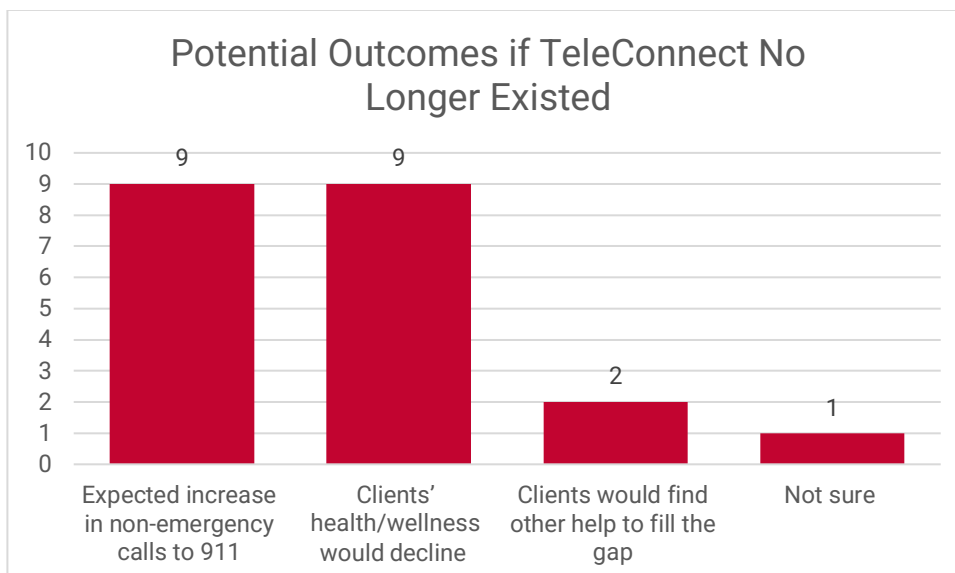
Impacts on Guelph–Wellington Healthcare

Community partners were asked about the impact of the TeleConnect program on healthcare in Guelph–Wellington. Most (n=9) participants reported that TeleConnect has had positive impacts on healthcare in the area, and one participant was unsure.

They were also asked to rate on a scale of 1–5 the impact that TeleConnect has on healthcare in Guelph–Wellington, where 1=not at all and 5=a great deal. The average response for decreasing costs in the healthcare system was 3.14, and the average response for improved access to services in the healthcare system was 3.44, indicating a moderate impact in both of these areas. The average response to the TeleConnect program providing a better suited service to clients was 3.60, meaning that the program also appears to provide a moderately more suited service to clients.

Community partners were asked about what might happen if the TeleConnect programs no longer existed (Figure 7). They were able to select multiple options; 21 responses were collected. Outcomes were identified as follows: a decline in client health and wellness (n=9), an expected increase in non-emergency 911 calls (n=9), clients would find other help to fill the gap in service (n=2), and unsure (n=1). The survey provided an option for additional comments, but no further information was provided by participants about the potential impacts if TeleConnect no longer existed.

Figure 7: Potential outcomes if TeleConnect no longer existed.





Program-Related Challenges

Survey participants were asked if they faced any challenges related to the TeleConnect program. Only one answered yes, and nine answered no. One challenge identified by a community partner with the TeleConnect program is client medication adherence and answering the phone, despite reminders.

Additional Comments


The survey asked community partners if they had any additional comments about the TeleConnect program. Five participants expressed an appreciation for the TeleConnect program, complementing the program's "great work." Two participants discussed referring clients to the program, noting the ease of the referring process and frequent referrals. Three community partners also commented on the value of the TeleConnect program to clients and the community. The following quote illustrates these findings:

I personally have had many clients tell me how much they appreciate the daily phone calls from TeleConnect and how it truly makes their day. One client calls them her "angels." Other clients have greatly improved [their] medication compliance which is amazing and so beneficial for not only our client but also our healthcare system. Thank you for providing this service.

Discussion

The survey results demonstrate that the TeleConnect alternative community health program complements mainstream healthcare services and medicine, providing valuable services for the Guelph–Wellington community. These findings support previous research indicating that alternative community health programs can overcome cost barriers to community care (Herman et al., 2005; Reed et al., 2019) and are both effective in helping clients address health-related challenges and cost effective (Moroz et al., 2020). In this study, these findings were supported largely by the data collected from community partners as well as some information from clients and volunteers. As demonstrated specifically by community partners, TeleConnect lessens healthcare system costs, improves access to healthcare services, and provides a more suitable service to clients. Without the TeleConnect program, community partners believe that there would be increased strain on the health care system, especially in relation to 911 calls and emergency room visits. Service provider testimonials support the finding that TeleConnect decreases workloads, allows service providers more time to assist others, and provides critical trauma support. These findings are also supported by some information from both clients and volunteers, as evidenced by testimonials and the ratings provided on client health and wellbeing.

Alternative health services can also benefit client mental health and wellbeing (Wye et al., 2009). Data from all three surveys reported improvement in the mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing of people using the service and of the community more broadly. Notably, TeleConnect is integral for combatting social isolation for older adults. Both client and volunteer testimonials highlight the significant challenges that clients face with social isolation, including crisis prevention and emotional processing. In this regard, TeleConnect is also a critical mental health



support for clients experiencing trauma, crisis, and mental illness. This support is reflected in responses from all three surveys.

There is a clear demand for Community Compass Services' TeleConnect program, as demonstrated by the high volume of program calls and results from the client surveys. The client survey results indicate an interest in additional or increased services and high client satisfaction with the program. Clients have had positive experiences and positive impacts on their health and wellbeing due to the program and show an appreciation for it. Volunteer and staff survey results also support these claims. In line with past research which found that alternative health programs can reduce cost barriers to community costs, reduce hospital admissions, and benefit community mental health and wellbeing outcomes (Benthien et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2005; Reed et al., 2019; Wye et al., 2009), findings from the Community Partner survey demonstrated that the loss of the TeleConnect program may increase the burden on the healthcare system and impact clients' wellbeing.

The volunteers and staff additionally highlighted operational and practical challenges in meeting client and community needs. The results also indicate that there is a greater need for TeleConnect services beyond the current client base, both demographically and geographically. Volunteer callers and staff have emphasized that the program is at capacity and unable to provide services and support to more clients.

The majority of TeleConnect calls are made by volunteers, which may present challenges in recruitment, retention, and service provision. As exemplified in the survey results, the calling process is not uniform. Variations are noted in the length of the phone calls and the support given to meet client needs. How clients would like calls to occur can be different from what the program currently offers. This finding may be attributed to diverse client needs and the training provided to and capacities of staff, interns, and volunteers at Compass Community Services. These challenges are reflected in a recent Statistics Canada Survey on Business Conditions (2022), which finds that 67% of organizations with volunteers report a shortage of new volunteers and 51% report challenges with retention. In the non-profit sector serving individuals and households, 28% of organizations report that volunteer recruitment and retention challenges result in paid employees working more hours, and 35% report a reduction in the programs and services provided.

The volunteer and staff surveys also highlight that increases in the program's budget and its funding are required to allow the program to expand and reach a wider client base, hire and provide training for more callers, and/or increase call options. Based on the service provision challenges identified, additional funding for staff positions may support greater call consistency, better trained volunteer personnel to manage diverse client needs, and other opportunities to improve the overall quality of service. There is also room for growth and to improve reach to diverse client bases beyond the current demographic.



Conclusion

In partnership with CCS, the Research Shop conducted surveys with TeleConnect clients, community health partners, and CCS staff and volunteers to determine the impacts of the TeleConnect program on the community of Guelph–Wellington. Results from the surveys demonstrate that TeleConnect supports community and individual health and wellbeing, reduces social isolation, and, overall, positively impacts clients and the healthcare system in the Guelph–Wellington community. Despite agreement among survey participants that there is room for growth in the program, expansion opportunities are constrained by practical aspects of the calling process, such as the number of staff and volunteers, limited time, and a lack of financial resources. An avenue for further research may be to assess the challenges and benefits of onboarding more staff and volunteers to make TeleConnect expansion possible.

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