

Summary: Understanding the Impacts of Compass Community Services' TeleConnect Program

October 2023

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Introduction

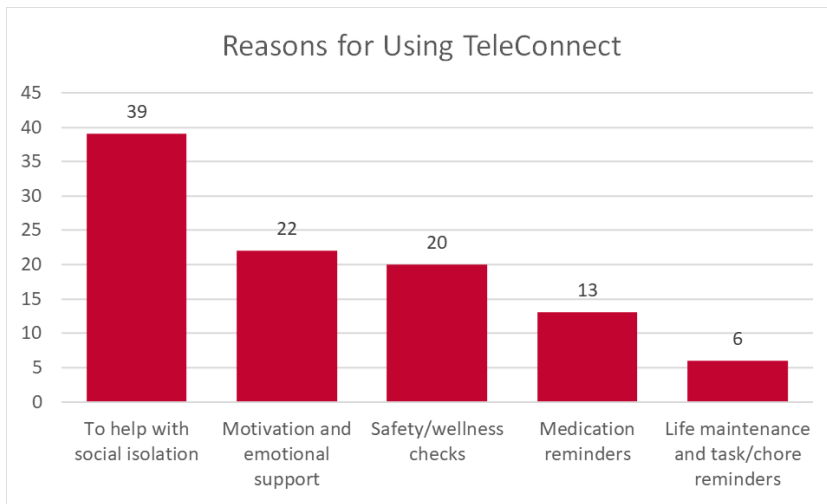
Compass Community Services (CCS) provides a range of mental health and social support services to the Guelph–Wellington community and the surrounding area. CCS offers a unique, free program called TeleConnect. TeleConnect is an innovative, alternative community health program and outbound call service providing emotional support, socialization, wellness checks, medication reminders, motivation, and assistance with accessing resources to community members.

Complementary alternative community health programs such as TeleConnect can overcome cost barriers to community care (Moroz et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2019), reduce hospital admissions (Benthien et al., 2020), and benefit community mental health and wellbeing outcomes (Wye et al., 2009). Most TeleConnect referrals come from healthcare providers unable to provide the level of support required by clients. Demand for the program is high, with TeleConnect completing over 34,500 calls with clients in 2022–2023 thus far. TeleConnect provides critical support to the community and fills key service gaps that may positively contribute to an overall reduction in the use of emergency services.

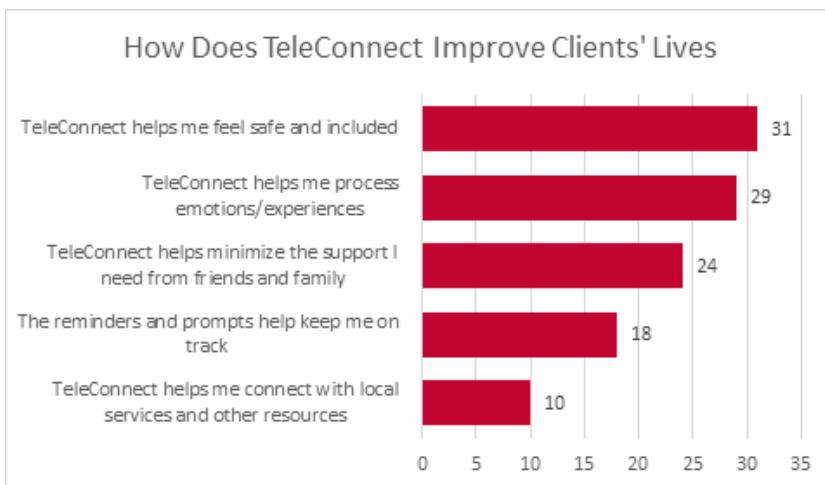
CCS partnered with the Research Shop, part of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI) at the University of Guelph, to evaluate the impact of TeleConnect on the community. This Summary Report presents an overview of the findings from online and mail-in surveys conducted with 54 TeleConnect clients, 39 CCS staff and volunteers, and 10 community partners.

Client Results

TeleConnect clients range from youth to older adults, people struggling with mental and physical health issues, addictions, homelessness, abuse, isolation, and more. This survey found that many clients are older adults who live alone: 43% of participants (n=23) were 71 years or older, and 77% of participants (n=40) lived alone.



The most common reason that participants reported using TeleConnect was to lessen the impact of social isolation (n=39), followed by using it for motivation and emotional support (n=22), safety/wellness checks (n=20), medication reminders (n=13), and life maintenance and task/chore reminders (n=6). Participants were able to select more than one response.



This survey also found that TeleConnect has had positive impacts on clients' health and wellbeing. The most significant impacts of the TeleConnect program identified by participants included improving their social inclusion and safety (n=31), helping them with emotional processing (n=29), and minimizing the support they required from friends and family (n=24). Participants were able to select more than one response.

Overall, client participants reported having an excellent experience using TeleConnect. Some examples of positive program impacts on clients are highlighted in the following quotations:

TeleConnect calls can lift my mood [and] helps me to manage chronic pain and gives me reminders to take required medication.

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.

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.

Client Program Impact Ratings

TeleConnect 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.

4.22/5

Impact on improving their health and wellbeing.

Staff and Volunteer Results

Volunteers, staff members, and interns began working or volunteering with TeleConnect for many reasons. The most common reasons reported by participants included to gain volunteer experience (n=34), out of personal interest (n=25), to improve future career prospects (n=21), and to gain job experience (n=12).

When asked about the impact that volunteering or working at TeleConnect has had on their own lives, almost half (n=18) of participants reported personal impacts, including: skill building opportunities (n=12), improved awareness of others and themselves (n=9), improved confidence (n=6), and professional development opportunities (n=6). Some participants (n=9) also reported that TeleConnect provided a positive and rewarding experience to help others. All participants (n=34) felt supported by TeleConnect and CCS, notably through staff support and training.

Most significantly, all staff and volunteer participants (n=35) reported that they believed the TeleConnect program has had positive impacts on clients.

Staff and Volunteer Program Impact Ratings

TeleConnect volunteers, staff, and interns were asked to rate on a scale of 1–5 how they felt TeleConnect impacted clients' wellbeing, where 1 = not at all and 5 = a great deal.

4.74/5

Impact on improving clients' emotional support

4.6/5

Impact on improving clients' mental wellbeing

3.72/5

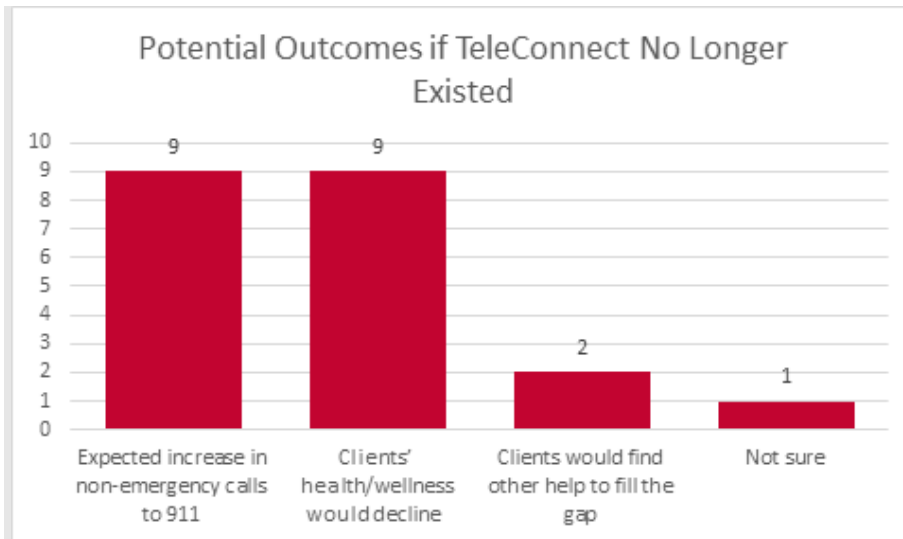
Impact on improving clients' physical wellbeing

Some (n=10) participants indicated 'other' positive impacts of TeleConnect, including: crisis and suicide prevention and intervention for clients (n=3), addressing isolation and providing community for clients (n=2), improving client safety (n=1), improving client comfort (n=1), and improving clients' social wellbeing (n=1).

Community Partner Results

Community partner survey participants included those from paramedicine, social work, mental health and domestic violence (clinical therapy, intake, and program management) in the City of Guelph and/or Wellington County. All participants referred clients to CCS.

Half (n=5) of the participants reported that the TeleConnect program had reduced their workload or the workload of their coworkers, while one responded "no" and four responded "unsure." Community partners 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. They also reported that these factors contributed to a reduction in their workload and allowed for the reallocation of their time to other community members.



All participants agreed that TeleConnect has had positive impacts on clients, and most (n=9) reported that TeleConnect has had a positive impact on healthcare in Guelph–Wellington. They suggested that if TeleConnect no longer existed, outcomes would include increases in non-emergency 911 calls (n=9), a decline in client wellness (n=9), and that, to a lesser extent, clients would seek other help to fill the gap (n=2). Participants were able to select more than one response.

Community Partner Program Impact Ratings

TeleConnect community partners were asked to rate on a scale of 1–5 how they felt TeleConnect impacted clients' wellbeing and healthcare in Guelph–Wellington, where 1 = not at all and 5 = a great deal.

4.22/5

Impact on improving clients' emotional support

4.11/5

Impact on filling a service gap

3.89/5

Impact on improving clients' mental wellbeing

3.17/5

Impact on improving clients' physical wellbeing



3.14/5

Impact on decreasing costs in the healthcare system

3.60/5

Impact on providing better services to clients

3.44/5

Impact on improving clients' access to services

Conclusion

The survey results demonstrate that the TeleConnect program provides valuable services for the Guelph–Wellington community that complement mainstream healthcare and medicine. The TeleConnect program supports and benefits the health and wellbeing of both clients and the community. The survey results report improvements in the mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing of people using the service and of the broader community. Additionally, the results demonstrate that TeleConnect plays a critical role in combatting social isolation for older adults. TeleConnect is also a critical mental health support for clients experiencing trauma, crisis, and mental illness, as reflected in responses from all three surveys. The high volume of program calls, and results from the client surveys highlight the demand for TeleConnect program services, and the program's value to clients and the community. There is also room for the TeleConnect program to grow, as indicated by all volunteer and staff survey participants. The main areas for growth highlighted by volunteers and staff included: an increased budget (n=24), increased client reach (n=24), increased number of staff (n=23), and increased number of calls (n=17).

The TeleConnect program also complements and enhances mainstream healthcare services in the community. The survey results from community partners demonstrate that TeleConnect lessens healthcare system costs, improves access to healthcare services, and provides a suitable service to clients. Without the TeleConnect program, community partners believe that there would be increased strain on the healthcare system, especially in relation to 911 calls and emergency room visits. Service provider testimonials suggest that TeleConnect decreases workloads, allows service providers more time to assist others, and provides critical trauma support. These findings are further supported by testimonials from clients and volunteers and reflect previous research indicating that alternative community health programs help clients overcome cost barriers to community care (Herman et al., 2005; Reed et al., 2019), help clients address health-related challenges, and are cost effective (Moroz et al., 2020). Future research and programming may focus on the challenges and benefits of onboarding more staff and volunteers as the program grows.



References

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