



Virtual Program Developer Guide

Introduction

birch

Bundle of Interventions, Resources, and Culture Hub



PROGRAM DESIGN

This **Virtual Program Developer Guide** was developed in consultation with Indigenous service providers who have successfully delivered virtual mental health programming in their communities. The goal of this guide is to share successful strategies and useful information for those who may be interested in learning more about how to develop useful, safe, and engaging virtual mental health programming.

This section will review the potential strengths, considerations, and opportunities for virtual care services. It will discuss in more detail how this Guide was developed, including previous research, community consultation, and recommendations supported by Thunderbird Partnership Foundation.

For more resources, please visit the BIRCH website at birchbundle.ca



THIS GUIDE IS FOR YOU

This guide is intended to provide you with culturally-relevant information that can support the development of virtual mental health programming that is based on your community need.

The suggestions provided in this guide are intended for those who are considering a “DIY” approach to program development. This guide is intended for folks who may not have pre-existing knowledge of technology, delivering programming in a virtual space before, or know much about how to adapt current programming to a new format.



Virtual services can increase the range of useful supports available in our communities.

We aim to provide you with some additional considerations, recommendations, and proposed options to increase engagement in a virtual space, ways to increase confidentiality, and how to connect with other folks doing similar work.

In This Guide

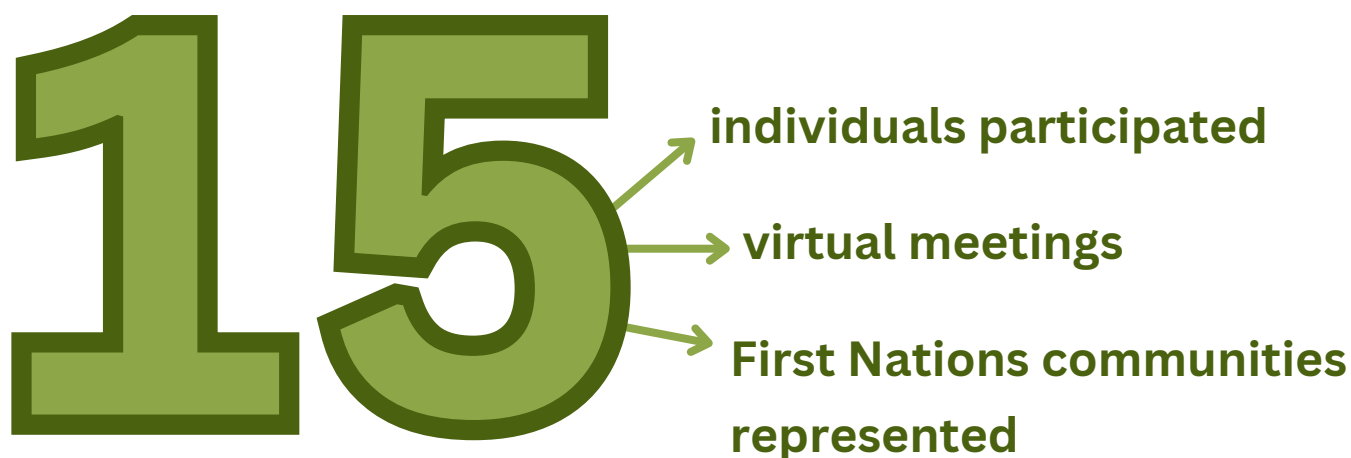


GUIDE

DEVELOPMENT

This guide was informed by a First Nations-led National Virtual Treatment Hub Working Group, supported by Thunderbird Partnership Foundation. This working group was formed when addiction treatment centres were mandated to be closed in response to public health pandemic protocols.

This was a space for First Nations program providers to regularly discuss how to implement virtual services to meet the mental health needs in their communities.



This guide is devised from the collective knowledge and shared experiences of this group, which we continue to be grateful for.

GUIDE DEVELOPMENT

Developing culturally-relevant and safe virtual services has been a priority of Thunderbird Partnership Foundation for many recent years.

Indigenous communities are often early adopters of technology as they attempt to connect community members with difficult to reach social, health, and educational programs and services.



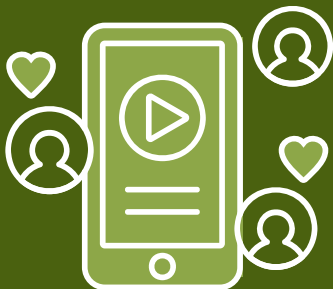
2020

Formed Virtual Hub working group in response to treatment centre closures



2021

Preliminary evaluation of available Indigenous-led virtual care supports



2022

Program (BIRCH) development and evaluation funded



Public Health
Agency of Canada
Agence de la santé
publique du Canada



Explored wise practices of providing cultural teachings in a virtual space

2024

2025

Launch of BIRCH development and evaluation

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For more information:

- [eHealth Youth Recommendation Report](#)
- [Wise Practices Scoping Review](#)
- [Expanded 2024 Review](#)
- [Wise Practices for Virtual Care \(launched in 2021\)](#)

LESSONS LEARNED

What We Did

Scoping review of available published literature for eHealth with Indigenous youth

Preliminary consultation with Indigenous virtual service providers

Consultations about wise practices for sharing cultural teachings in a virtual space



What We Found

Few programs are developed specifically for Indigenous youth

Virtual programs can be safe, feasible, and effective when Indigenous-led

Sharing cultural knowledge virtually is viable when done with appropriate consent and contextual considerations

Takeaway Message

Available programs need to be reviewed for cultural safety and relevance

Ways to increase sustainability, and engagement in programs will improve program success and reach

Ways to protect cultural knowledge can continue to be explored with communities. There is not a one size fits all approach

WHY GO VIRTUAL?

Virtual programs can provide accessible treatment through alternative approaches to mental health care that can address existing gaps in communities. Although virtual programs are not ever intended to replace existing community services, they can be another option in a spectrum of services available in community.

There are many benefits to virtual programming. The next section will cover the selection to the right.



Availability



Convenience



Continuity



Privacy



Outreach



Flexibility



Client-led

01. Availability

Virtual care expands access to mental health services, particularly for individuals who can't travel to receive services or who live in areas when in-person or other types of mental health care may not be available. Virtual services can provide an option of mental health care to people in rural and remote areas, or who have trouble with transportation.

02. Convenience

Virtual care can offer services at times when individuals need to access it. Certain services can be available 24/7 to provide immediate support for individuals as needed. These programs often have no wait list for services, meaning those who want to be engaged can be enrolled relatively easily.

03. Continuity

Virtual services can be integrated with other available programs to support prevention, continuing care, or even early support for program goals. Virtual services can complement other programs available in community.





04. Privacy

Virtual care can provide a discreet route for individuals seeking substance use support to access support privately, without having to let people know they are seeking services in their community. People can access services in the comfort of their own home.

05. Outreach

Virtual care can allow providers to a broader reach and can extend teachings to more people with relatively less demands on program providers. This reach can be done in a relatively cost-effective way when compared to other types of mental health program formats.

06. Flexibility

Virtual programs sometimes have less rigid program structures, with less program “rules” and requirements for participation for those who uses these services. This means that people can access care how they want to, with less program demands or needs.

07. Client-Led

Virtual programs are often client-directed and focus on self-management of mental health symptoms. This can build individual confidence, capacity, and ownership over one’s mental health journey, in a space where one learns at their own pace.

VIRTUAL PROGRAM CONSIDERATIONS

Although there are many benefits to virtual programs, there are some considerations when implementing such supports in this way.



Here are some considerations that have been brought forward by community members doing this work:

01. Privacy

People need to know what happens with their information provided in the program and who has access to it over time.

02. Safety

Ways to identify and protect people who are at risk for safety concerns need to be embedded in virtual programs.

03. Engagement

Engaging users by sharing information in meaningful ways and personalizing program content is helpful.

04. Relevance

Program content needs to fit the needs of the people using it. People with more complex needs may not be a good fit for virtual services.



**Communities must lead
the development of virtual
programs to create programs
that are culturally-safe
and relevant.**

CONCLUSION

Developing virtual mental health programming can be a way to extend and provide available services among Indigenous-led treatment programs



Virtual services can be useful

- Accessibility
- Flexibility
- Personalization



Some considerations are necessary

- Privacy
- Safety
- Relevance



Thoughtful development is required

- Program design
- Content creation
- Evaluation

The next modules of this guide will focus on ways to increase the relevance, safety, usability, and uptake of virtual programming that can be delivered by Indigenous communities. These guides aim to share some of the teachings learned from other Indigenous service providers who have successfully implemented virtual services.

Thank you

for your continued support of the BIRCH program.

We hope you find this resource guide useful.



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