2022-2 Affordable and Accessible Internet

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Whereas: Newcomers to Manitoba rely on the internet for a myriad of settlement and integration needs, including finding information about Canadian life, housing, employment, healthcare, education, childcare, language programs, transportation, government benefits, and a wide range of other programs and services.

Whereas: Newcomers are generally on a limited budget during their first few years in Canada. They may be on Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) or the Refugee Assistance Program (rates comparable to EIA) which provide a level of income support well below the poverty line[1]. Those that are working and/or in school, are often in low wage positions.

Whereas: Internet access and the purchase of digital devices come with significant financial costs. In 2019, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) reported that the average internet plan cost $80 per month[2]. Newcomers on limited budgets have to choose between these and other essential needs like paying for food and shelter. Those who can afford internet access, may only be able to afford basic service, which is often of poor quality and unable to host multiple devices at once.

Whereas: Newcomers, especially those who have temporary immigration status, are seniors, or are living in rural or remote areas, are at risk of social isolation, as they adjust to Canadian culture and climate, and navigate systems which are unfamiliar to them. The pandemic has increased the risk of social isolation for society at large, and has exacerbated existing inequities.

Whereas: Access to the internet and digital devices is now a requirement for full participation in Canadian society. The internet is used to apply for employment, access basic information about services, apply for government benefits and healthcare registration, and access emergency, safety and public health information. Those without the financial means and/or digital literacy to participate in the online world are at a disadvantage in terms of access to information and social inclusion.

Whereas: During the COVID-19 pandemic, internet access has become even more essential as many formerly in-person programs and services moved online and some physical office spaces were closed to the public. Many newcomer families have struggled to maintain stable internet and access to digital devices for multiple children and adults completing remote schoolwork and language classes.

Whereas: Many newcomers who cannot afford home internet or do not have a quiet place to work or study at home, rely on public spaces like libraries and community organizations, and businesses like coffee shops and restaurants, to access Wi-Fi on their mobile devices or on public computers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these spaces have

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[1] Laidley, J. & Tabbara, M. (2021). *Welfare in Canada, 2020.* Maytree: https://maytree.com/wp-content/uploads/Welfare_in_Canada_2020.pdf p. 45.

[2] Government of Canada (2019). *Communications Monitoring Report 2019.* Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission: https://crtc.gc.ca/pubs/cmr2019-en.pdf p. 60.

been closed which has affected the ability of newcomers to stay connected with family, and access important settlement services, including online English language programming.

Whereas: Internet access is not equal across the province. Many rural and remote communities do not have access to the same number of internet service providers and the high-speed connections that urban residents enjoy[3]. They often pay the same or more than urban residents for a much slower connection, and if high quality connections are available, they often come with high start-up and monthly fees. There are also dead zones affecting large sections of Manitoba highways, where no Wi-Fi or data connection is available, creating an elevated level of risk for travellers and residents experiencing an emergency in these areas.

Whereas: The above mentioned barriers to internet access, whether stemming from lack of affordability or geographic accessibility, disproportionately affect newcomers living on low income or in rural areas, all of which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Be it resolved that: MANSO calls on the Government of Canada to declare internet an essential service/utility (ie. access to electricity or water), and to regulate the cost of internet plans so that all residents pay reasonable rates. As an essential service, all Manitoba residents must have access to it, regardless of where they live.

Be it further resolved that: MANSO calls on the Government of Canada and the Government of Manitoba to introduce a comprehensive subsidy program for all low-income households, including those on government assistance, to ensure that low-income households can access internet connectivity at a rate affordable to them. This could include expanding the eligibility of the Connecting Families program.

Be it further resolved that: MANSO calls on municipal governments across Manitoba to work with public, private and non-profit partners to designate 'free Wi-Fi zones' in locations which are publicly accessible, and to make this information available to all members of the public.

Be it further resolved that: MANSO acknowledges actions taken by the Government of Canada and Province of Manitoba to expand internet connectivity in rural and remote areas of Manitoba[4]. MANSO urges both levels of government to continue this important work and further expand access to affordable and good quality internet connection to more rural and remote communities throughout Manitoba.

Be it further resolved that: MANSO calls on the Government of Canada and the Province of Manitoba to continue and expand funding opportunities and partnerships with schools, settlement service providers, senior centres and other organizations who provide:
- Access to free/low-cost devices and device lending libraries.
- Digital literacy training, tailored to the unique needs of newcomer communities in Manitoba.

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[3] Government of Canada (2019). Communications Monitoring Report 2019. Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission: https://crtc.gc.ca/pubs/cmr2019-en.pdf p. 79-82.

[4] Government of Manitoba (2021). *Government signs contribution agreement with Xplorenet Communications Inc.* to start network build. Government of Manitoba: https://news.gov.mb.ca/news/index.html?item=52786&posted=2021-11-30
Government of Canada (2021). *Selected Universal Broadband Fund Projects.* Government of Canada: https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/139.nsf/eng/00021.html
Government of Canada (2019). High-speed Access for All: Canada's Connectivity Strategy. Government of Canada: https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/139.nsf/vwapj/ISEDC_19-170_Connectivity_Strategy_E_Web.pdf/$file/ISEDC_19-170_Connectivity_Strategy_E_Web.pdf