



## **TCHC Provision of Internet Access to All TCHC Households: Pilot Program Update**

Item 6B

November 18, 2021

Tenant Services Committee

**Report: TSC:2021-70**

**To:** Tenant Services Committee (“TSC”)

**From:** Chief Operating Officer

**Date:** October 31, 2021

### **PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this report is to provide the TSC with an update on the ongoing work to implement recommendations to determine the feasibility of providing access to the internet in all Toronto Community Housing (“TCHC”) buildings, outlined in the November 24, 2020 TSC report, “TCHC Provision of Internet Access to All TCHC Households”.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

It is recommended that the TSC receive the report for information.

### **BACKGROUND:**

On November 24, 2020, the TSC approved the following:

1. Authorize a study to determine the feasibility of providing access to the internet in all TCHC buildings (the inclusion of townhouses and individual homes to be determined depending on the technology available) and bring the findings back to the Board for consideration. The study will explore:

- The feasibility of participating in the City of Toronto's (the "City") provision of wifi connectivity to vulnerable communities;
  - A TCHC solution;
  - Third-party delivery with TCHC covering costs; and
  - A model for common space internet access and in-unit based access.
2. Authorize the establishment of an inter-departmental group of staff to set the terms and administer the feasibility study; and
  3. Authorize the appropriate staff to take the necessary actions to give effect to the above recommendations.

After receiving the approval of the TSC and Board of Directors ("Board") in November 2020, an inter-departmental team was formed to explore pathways to support tenants in accessing the internet. To date, the following actions have completed:

- The inter-departmental group comprised of Information Technology ("IT"), Facilities Management ("FM"), Programs and Partnerships was established to conduct the feasibility review;
- The inter-departmental group met with teams from internet providers to discuss possible options;
- Worked closely with the City of Toronto's ConnectTO initiative to review synergies to avoid service duplication and maximize resources;
- Conducted the review of financial feasibility to roll out a system-wide implementation plan;
- Developed the contractual terms, agreements, communication plans, funding plan, sites;
- Continue to work with internet service providers to pursue other internet provision options for tenants; and
- Established a pilot program with the City's ConnectTO team to provide common space internet to 100 TCHC buildings.

### ***Considerations***

#### **1. Emerging Challenges Emerged in the Delivery of Internet Access**

##### ***Long Term Funding***

Based on updated estimates, implementing a city-wide in-suite internet to TCHC households (at a 96% uptake rate) is estimated to cost \$13.8M annually. Currently, it has been confirmed that the City could not provide additional funding for this expense. Additional funding options were reviewed through the province and federal government, but those primarily focus on infrastructure installations, common space and public access internet sites. To date, no formal funding channel has been secured to fund the entire project. The TCHC working group has been working with the City's ConnectTO to explore options.

### ***Current State of Internet Access***

Based on the information provided to us by Rogers, almost half (42.3%) of TCHC units have internet supplied by Rogers, at an average price of \$40/month with a \$58.54 household fixed technology spend. Combined with wireless, they believe nearly two-thirds of residents have some form of Internet access. We are currently seeking similar information from Bell and other providers. Based on this, it would appear that the number of tenants without internet may be less than originally anticipated. However, this does not speak to the precarious nature of access, hardship and challenges tenant households may have to maintain access.

### ***Updates On Work To-Date to Improve Tenants' Internet Connectivity***

#### ***In-Suite Internet Pilot with ConnectTO***

TCHC is currently pursuing a pilot program option with the City to provide "hotel-style wifi" to selected TCHC buildings. This approach will be based on infrastructure and capital investment that expands on the current infrastructure work ConnectTO is undertaking. This model will have a much higher start-up cost for capital but will decrease operational costs considerably. For example, operational costs city-wide would drop from \$13.8 million to closer to \$2 million. The proposed pilot program will also allow TCHC to partner with the City on the initiative allowing for joint effort and support. ConnectTO is currently confirming the feasibility of this approach and it may commence in Spring 2022.

### ***Identifying Barriers to Internet Access***

To obtain a baseline understanding, TCHC included questions in the 2021 tenant survey that will help specifically identify access barriers for tenants that will inform the manner in how TCHC tailors the supports it provides (see Figure 1). The questions align with a StatsCan study that was conducted earlier in 2021; the data from these questions will not only provide insight on what barriers exist for tenants and the effect size for each, but how they compare to the broader population.

*Figure 1: Tenant Survey Questions, 2021*

<p><b>5. Do you have reliable access to internet in your Toronto Community Housing unit?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p>
<p><b>6. If no, what barriers to internet access exist in your household?</b>  <i>[Please select all that apply]</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Internet service is not available in my building/unit</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I don't have a device that connects to the internet</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> My internet speed is too slow</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The cost of internet is too high</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I don't know how to use the internet</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Security or privacy concerns</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> My disability limits me from accessing the internet</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No need or interest</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other</p>

### ***Expanded Options Connected For Success Internet Package***

Due to ongoing demand and increased need for more internet access speed, as well as discussions with TCHC, Rogers has expanded its original \$9.99/month plus taxes Connected for Success Package to include additional download speed options.

*Table 1: Internet Service Plans*

<b>Ignite Internet 25u</b>	<b>Ignite Internet 50u</b>	<b>Ignite Internet 75u</b>	<b>Ignite Internet 150u</b>
\$9.99/ mo plus taxes	\$14.99/ mo plus taxes	\$24.99/ mo plus taxes	\$34.99/ mo plus taxes
Up to 25 Mbps download speed	Up to 50 Mbps download speed	Up to 75 Mbps download speed	Up to 150 Mbps download speed

TCHC is currently finalizing the memorandum of understanding (“MOU”) with Rogers, after which TCHC will begin joint outreach to communicate the increased options to tenants. TCHC has updated posters and website content to date but will begin more active joint outreach to share the increased opportunities with tenants. TCHC continues to work with the City to work with third parties to try and subsidize internet costs at a household level.

### ***Working with the City to identify long-term funding supports***

TCHC continues to work with ConnectTO to identify sustainable funding models. This includes the following:

- Continuing to pursue infrastructure and operational funding investment by the City and the Province; and
- Exploring options with Toronto Employment and Social Services to pursue a subsidy for individuals and families on Social Assistance.

The final model could include a combination of approaches depending on the circumstances of the community. For example, high-rise buildings may be better suited for infrastructure investment. In contrast, townhouse communities could benefit from an internet subsidy model or prefer to obtain a package through Connected for Success.

### ***Common Space Internet Pilot Roll Out***

In response to ongoing COVID barriers for marginalized communities, in February 2021, the Mayor announced a \$2 million investment to expand internet access in TCHC buildings as part of the City’s ConnectTO initiative. This funding will provide one year of common space internet to over 100 TCHC buildings. To date, we have begun implementation and have worked out a rollout schedule that will have buildings connected over the next year. TCHC has been able to hire three project managers responsible for the oversight of 33-35 sites. A robust communication plan will be implemented to update tenants that will benefit from the additional service and ensure COVID safety guidelines and limitations are re-enforced.

### ***Additional Internet Enabled Service Options for Tenants: Toronto Community Librarian Project***

TCHC, ConnectTO and the Toronto Public Library have partnered to bring the Community Librarian (“CL”) to TCHC communities. A donation by the Balsam Foundation, through the Toronto Public Library Foundation, funds TCHC’s CL Program. The Balsam Foundation also provides funding for 135 laptops to be distributed as part of the TCHC initiative. The entire TCHC program is to be delivered over three years, based on the receipt of these funds.

The CL Program provides service to vulnerable, underserved populations across the City. The CL can offer a wide range of services while on site. Additional services may be available upon request and based on the needs of TCHC and will include:

- New library card registrations (onsite);
- Renewal of existing library cards and account support (including fines forgiveness);
- Information Services:
  - Providing basic and advanced research and information support;
  - Demonstrating resources and databases (like Lynda.com) available to customers;
- Available on the spot or by appointment (e.g. Book a Librarian);
- Reader’s Services: Providing suggestions for books and other materials based on customer requests and interest;
- Literacy Services;
- Program delivery;
- Delivering standardized programming such as:
  - Book Clubs and discussion groups
  - Children’s programming
  - Financial Literacy
  - Health Literacy
  - Customizing programs based on the needs of the customers and organization;
- User Education;
- Pop Up Learning Lab;
- Overview to TPL’s programs and services; and

- Connect TCHC residents with their local library.

**IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS:**

- Costs for the common space pilot have been provided by the City, a more long-term funding plan for the sites is also under review;
- TCHC will consider the impact on TCHC operations in the study, including IT resource impact, maintenance, and troubleshooting; and
- TCHC continues to work with its Legal Services team to address the legal and contractual considerations related to these initiatives.

**CONCLUSION:**

TCHC is currently working with ConnectTO to actively pursue multiple pathways to support tenants in accessing the internet in their homes. This continues to be a priority for us as we look for solutions to keep a long-term, sustainable option for tenants. The working group will provide a Q1 update in 2022 to the TSC on ongoing activities.

**SIGNATURE:**

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