



# Improving Access to Care in Maine

## Role of Telehealth Access Points and Community Organizations

### Background

In rural Maine, residents face many obstacles when accessing health care, such as shortages in health care providers and long wait times to see a provider in person. Leaving one's local community for care results in higher costs involving transportation and overnight trips as well as lost time from work or school. Along with these challenges, there's also harsh weather, caring for other family members, and a lack of public transportation.



Telehealth usage dramatically increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted how such technology can help overcome access-to-care barriers that many in Maine face. Once you remove the need to travel long distances and taking time off work or other responsibilities, people can more easily schedule and keep their health care appointments.

Telehealth is a helpful tool for addressing patient challenges; however, it may not be available in rural or underserved communities. Many people in Maine still lack access to broadband service, have no internet access at all, or lack up-to-date technology or the knowledge needed for telehealth visits.

Despite efforts working to grant access to high-speed internet in such households and teaching digital skills to better use telehealth, such initiatives take time; however, non-medical, community-based organizations (CBOs) are stepping up to create local access to telehealth by implementing telehealth access points (TAPs). With grant funding to expand telehealth initiatives in Maine, MCD Global Health (MCD) has supported the startup of eight new TAPs.

## New TAPs in Maine

**Bridging the Gap (BTG)** is a low-barrier community resource hub serving individuals and families in and around Augusta who are experiencing poverty. BTG responds to immediate basic needs with their free hygiene products pantry, clothing bank, and resource connection support and helping funds. Telehealth access was recently added to their services.

BTG's new telehealth cart allows community members, many of whom are unhoused and without an internet-connected device of their own, to access their health and mental health care online. Other members go to BTG seeking support connecting with substance use disorder (SUD) treatment, and, through established relationships with organizations that offer SUD treatment via telehealth, BTG can now quickly respond to such time-sensitive situations.

BTG secured grant funding to purchase a telehealth cart, set up a private space where community members can meet with their care providers, and worked with MCD through the planning and early implementation stages of launching their TAP.

MCD provided technical assistance by identifying technology options and selecting the appropriate set up for their needs and training on using the equipment, workflow design, and introductions to behavioral health agencies and local hospital systems. MCD also helped develop customized marketing materials that BTG uses to familiarize community members with the new telehealth equipment available.

## What is a TAP?

A telehealth access point (TAP) is a public space with a reliable internet connection and a device, like a laptop, tablet, or telehealth cart, with a camera and microphone that users can use to connect with health care providers. Some community locations, like libraries, may already be functioning as TAPs, even if they're not calling themselves by that name. TAPs look different depending on the community's needs and the hosting organization's setting and resources.



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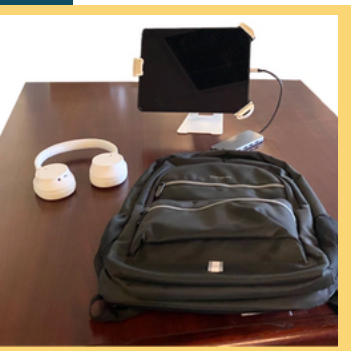
*Left: An example of a postcard that BTG shared with their community members.*

## TAP Spotlights

**Aroostook County Action Program (ACAP)** provides critical services to their community, including operating the Hope and Prosperity Center in Presque Isle. The center offers a warm, safe, inviting space where people work with one of ACAP's coaches to achieve their goals, such as applying for a new job or housing, health and wellness, or education needs.

Those who are served at the center often rely on public transportation to travel to in-person health care appointments, a time-consuming venture. ACAP already has an open-to-the-public space with high-quality internet, a private meeting space, and staff available to help people with digital navigation. The center's only barrier in creating telehealth access was funding for the technology.

MCD was able to use grant funding to purchase the telehealth technology for ACAP and provide training for staff. ACAP chose a telehealth cart, a 'tablet on wheels' with peripheral devices, like blood pressure monitors and examination cameras. The telehealth cart offers a flexible solution: it can be rolled into a private room for telehealth appointments or positioned in the main space for tasks, like job searches, resume building, or other needs.



**Aroostook Agency on Aging (AAA)** provides services and resources for older adults and their caregivers. They have established a network of 20 access points throughout Aroostook County, so, no matter where someone lives, there are nearby AAA services and resources. The access points are already hubs of health and wellness support, with offerings including fall prevention classes, wellness classes, and nutrition services. Adding telehealth access to their services was the logical next step.

While in the early stages of informing community members about available telehealth, AAA worked with MCD to design a solution that meets their current needs while also being adaptable for the future. MCD was able to assemble a portable telehealth kit that can easily be moved to any of the access points throughout the county. The kit includes a laptop, camera, headphones, examination camera, scopes, and a vitals kit for measuring blood pressure, temperature, and oxygen saturation.

While the goal is to have all of Aroostook's access points equipped with technology for telehealth access, the portable kit meets the needs and provides flexibility as their program evolves.





**Maine Seacoast Mission's Island Health Services** also chose portable telehealth kits for their evolving needs. For those who live on Maine's unbridged islands, traveling to the mainland for in-person provider visits requires coordinating with the ferry schedule, often an all-day affair.

Winter 2024 was challenging for many island residents who have increasingly difficulty traveling in harsh weather conditions. Long-awaited medical appointments are sometimes cancelled due to storms, which results in delays in essential health care.

The team does incredible work using their ship, the Sunbeam, to deliver care to island residents. The Sunbeam serves as a hub for community services and a health care clinic with telehealth access; however, some residents face barriers to safely boarding the boat or need telehealth appointments at times that don't align with the Sunbeam's schedule.

A pilot study is being done to find ways to expand telehealth access using portable telehealth kits strategically placed at community sites and available for lending to residents, as opposed to only on the Sunbeam. MCD strategized with the team to find a telehealth solution that meets the demands of island life and the needs of residents and providers.

Five portable telehealth kits were purchased for Island Health: three fully equipped kits with peripheral devices for use with provider support and two simpler tablet-based kits with stands and headphones for residents to make video appointments at home.

## Lessons Learned

Through its Northeast Telehealth Resource Center (NETRC), MCD has a long history of providing free technical support and education to new telehealth users and programs. Working with non-medical CBOs over the past year has uncovered considerations for supporting TAPs implementation work, including:

- Helping non-medical CBOs familiarize themselves with the health care landscape and telehealth-related terminology and technology.
- Developing workflows that integrate TAP operational requirements with other processes of the organization through creative thinking and involving different CBO staff. For example, determining how community members will schedule time to use the TAP space may require using new software, determining policies for shared-use spaces, and assigning staff new duties and training.
- Informing community members about TAP availability is vital, and CBOs may need support establishing connections, especially within the health care sector.
- Purchasing telehealth technology needed to establish these new TAPS through grant funding was essential. Once established, the ongoing costs are minimal. CBOs interested in establishing TAPs may need help explaining the role of telehealth access in the broader health care landscape when writing grant proposals.



In addition to the eight new TAPs featured in this report, MCD also supported the establishment of 91 telehealth endpoints at private non-medical institutions (PNMIs) over the past two years. These endpoints are designed specifically for use by facility residents.

With a total of 99 new, highly customized telehealth setups implemented, MCD was well-positioned to apply lessons learned from both PNMI and CBO partnerships to develop a resource that helps future CBOs successfully launch TAPs and expand access to care in their communities.

*Left: Marketing material encouraging PNMI residents to use telehealth for appointments.*

## Planning for the Future

The **Telehealth Access Points Toolkit for Community Organizations** is a culmination of MCD's experiences and learning and is available for any organization interested in starting a TAP or learning more. This free, online resource walks CBOs through the basics of telehealth and advances to more detailed information to support selecting technology, setting up the TAP physical space, and training staff.

This toolkit allows CBOs to build foundational knowledge, begin planning, and then contacting MCD's [Northeast Telehealth Resource Center](#) for assistance at any point along the way.

The free toolkit is available at [Telehealth Classroom](#), an open-access, self-paced online eLearning portal that offers a variety of toolkits and training modules with topics on telehealth implementation best practices, quality improvement, skill building for health care professionals, and more.

**Register for FREE to access the Telehealth Access Points Toolkit for Community Organizations and more!**



### Telehealth Access Points Toolkit for Community Organizations

START HERE

