

Text-based applications help populations experiencing mental health issues

An app customized for Indigenous populations has become especially useful in Saskatchewan.

BY DIANNE DANIEL

Not that long ago a young Indigenous person in Saskatchewan was sitting at home struggling with their math homework. With no one around to help, they reached for the Talking Stick – not a physical one used in many Indigenous cultures to allow people to speak and be heard respectfully in turn at meetings, but a virtual one.

Launched by the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN) in Saskatchewan, in partnership with TryCycle Data Systems Inc. of Ottawa, Talking Stick is an innovative digital behavioural health platform designed to give First Nations youth and adults a safe place to talk.

Building on the theme that ‘Every Voice Matters’ and available in 10 Indigenous languages to date with more to be supported this year, the free, text-only chat platform instantly and anonymously connects users to peer advocates who are trained to listen with compassion, respect and humility on any topic of conversation.

TryCycle Data Systems founder and CEO John MacBeth said it “made his heart sing” to hear about a child getting help with fractions because it confirms his company’s ‘by First Nations, for First Nations’ approach to delivering mobile behaviour health support is indeed building trust among community members.

“Man, oh man, was it ever a good feeling to know that one little guy out there got some help with their homework and hopefully their next day was a little bit better than the one before,” said MacBeth. “It just warmed my heart that first of all, this little kid knew Talking Stick existed and number two, they were comfortable enough to use it.”

The anecdote also “humanized” the journey Talking Stick has been on since April 2020, when it was first launched to support conversations related to COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy, as well as to encourage listening related to mental wellness, violence, anger, isolation, trauma, grief or loss, all of which was heightened during the pandemic.

Now available to all 74 First Nations represented by FSIN in Saskatchewan, Talking Stick logged 25,000 engagements from September 2022 to February 2023 alone. It is currently staffed by slightly more than 200 Indigenous peer advocates, people aged 16 or older from First Nations communities who are hired by TryCycle Data Systems and trained in partnership with Indigenous knowledge keepers. MacBeth expects to continue to work with FSIN – which has taken a leadership role in supporting Indigenous behavioural health – to expand the service.

A simple text messaging platform, Talking Stick is accessed through a web browser or smartphone. No login or registration is required and anyone using the service remains anonymous, with peer advocates identified by first name only. When a chat closes, the information disappears and any data collected by TryCycle relates to usage metrics only.

“What we’re trying to do is create a trust-based, predictable environment where people can just be listened to,” said MacBeth. “It’s an antidote for Facebook.”

When 11 people were killed and 18 were injured in a mass stabbing in the James Smith Cree Nation and Weldon, Sask., communities on September 4, 2022, Talking Stick saw a 500 percent spike in requests the next day, said MacBeth. Similar jumps occur whenever a new mass grave is discovered at a former residential school site.

FSIN Chief Bobby Cameron calls the service an important tool that gives people an extraordinary opportunity to express themselves. “They’re opening up like you wouldn’t believe and that’s a good thing, because people begin to heal when they feel like they’re being heard,” he said. “We’re trying to reignite – or ignite – that positive energy, positive spirit, in every one of us.”

TryCycle Data Systems is taking a disruptive ap-

The experts monitor the patient data but only the local staff know who the patient is.

“If the psychiatrist sees an issue, they say this patient ABC is exhibiting early signs of depression or is at risk of relapse, and now the clinician and psychiatrist can collaborate and triage the person, deciding on the best course of action to keep them stable,” he explained.

TryCycle Data System solutions are customized to each target audience. The goal within Indigenous communities, said MacBeth, is justice.

“There’s a massive deficit and lack of proprietary, culturally based, super sensitive engagements that speak to this demographic,” he said. “They are owed the same respect and attention that every other non-Indigenous community gets, but instead we always

seem to ‘hand it down’ – we design solutions for a non-Indigenous environment and then we give it to them and say they should be happy with what they get. We’re not doing that.”

In addition to only hiring Indigenous people to support its three offerings for First Nations communities, TryCycle Data Systems takes a holistic approach to development, partnering with different jurisdictional partners to ensure the platforms accurately support different languages and cultures. They are also working to build capacity by partnering with the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT) and First Nations University of Canada to train the next generation of Indigenous employees.

At the same time, their Indigenous partners are securing the funding necessary to keep the platforms freely available.

Chief Cameron expects usage to climb because digital behavioural health platforms are needed in every First Nations community across Canada. “We’re all doing a good service here. We’re helping people young and old to better their lives, to better themselves, to heal themselves,” he said. “It has to be sustainable; there’s no way around it. People are going to need that assistance and extra

support every day.”

In the veteran population, TryCycle Data Systems is working on gap management, using digital connections to support veterans who’ve asked for help but are waiting for services as well as those who’ve been recently discharged from a care program and are having a difficult time adjusting. The company is currently working with the Royal Canadian Legion, Saskatchewan First Nations Veteran’s Association and Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones to recruit retired veterans who will be educated and trained as support workers.

“We don’t want to lose these people on the wait list,” said MacBeth. “When somebody has come to the conclusion that they need help – which is a very strong thing for them to do – we want to make sure that person is in connection while they wait.”

The ability of a simple text messaging platform to serve such an important role in supporting mental health isn’t surprising to Gillian Strudwick, chief clinical informatics officer at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Ontario, and co-



ILLUSTRATION: LINDA WEISS

proach to supporting behavioural health in Canada by focusing solely on two under-resourced populations highly prone to challenges: Indigenous people and war veterans. In addition to Talking Stick, the company also offers TetherAll, which provides a private digital connection between a client and their health team, and is in the process of building Mylo’s Wish, a gamified platform aimed at preventing suicidal ideation and self-harm among Indigenous adolescents and youth.

TetherAll is the company’s flagship product. It ‘tethers’ a patient to a practitioner, using patient collected data (from journaling, for example) to create a secure, smart clinical dashboard that applies AI to proactively identify factors that could indicate regression or relapse in a patient’s condition, including their mental health.

In remote First Nations communities, TetherAll will serve as a “medical guardian angel,” said MacBeth, allowing clinicians to share anonymized patient data with remote subject matter experts such as substance use disorder specialists or psychiatrists.

creator of the MEMOTEXT BeWell mental health text messaging program.

BeWell was initially launched in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic to make it easier for people to access curated mental health resources and receive targeted wellness support. The program is now evolving to serve multiple populations, including front line healthcare workers.

In January, CAMH and MEMOTEXT were awarded funding from the Ontario Bioscience Innovation Organization (OBIO) to create a version of BeWell tailored to support CAMH social workers and occupational therapists (OTs), two groups that showed higher rates of burnout compared to other health disciplines in a July 2022 organizational study carried out by the organization. Specifically, 50 percent of social workers and 21.3 percent of OTs reported one or more burnout symptoms, including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and/or a reduced sense of personal accomplishment.

Designed in close partnership with an in-house clinical advisory group made up of OTs and social workers, the CAMH BeWell service launched this month. The number one goal was to help the frontline workers feel supported by creating a strong sense of community and camaraderie among them.

As Strudwick explained, the roughly 300 social workers and OTs employed at CAMH don't have a general forum to bring them together regularly. Some work independently in the community and others may be the only social worker on their unit.

Enrolment in the new BeWell service – a 12-week program consisting of tailored messages and wellness resources delivered via text – is voluntary. Some messages are simple shoutouts related to positive news, such as the completion of a project or an outstanding individual contribution to patient care at CAMH. Others are more motivational in nature such as reminders that it's okay to take a break and engage in self-care.

The service also shares information about discipline-specific resources available that can help OTs and social workers in their practice, to alleviate the burden they may be experiencing in their workload. Five burnout measures are highlighted to help users identify whether they have signs and symptoms.

"The largest sense we're getting from this group of individuals is to build a community in which individuals can feel that they're not alone in how they're feeling," said CAMH research coordinator Iman Kassam, noting that her research shows text messaging is a very accessible means of delivering support.

“What we found is that text was just simple and convenient, and that everyone engages with a text message service at some point in the day,” said Kassam. “Even when you receive a message, you don't have to read it at that exact point. You can save it for later and it will still be there. I think that's perhaps one of the more unique components of text messaging. It's so simple and yet so effective.”

BeWell is not a crisis support service or replacement for care, she added. Rather, it's intended to bridge connections and build awareness of wellness initiatives and wellness resources available to staff.

An earlier study conducted by the

CAMH Digital Mental Health Research Lab found that one of the biggest barriers preventing Canadians from using digital mental health tools was lack of awareness about what's available. “It's challenging to determine what's out there, what's evidence-based, what's credible and what would actually be helpful,” said Kassam. “Having a resource that does that legwork for you, and filters out the good from the

bad in finding mental health resources, is very helpful.”

Strudwick said there's value in keeping things simple. The hope is that making a tailored BeWell service available to OTs and social workers will help to “move the needle” on front line staff burnout, but they also recognize that addressing it at an individual level is only one piece of a very complex and systemic issue, she said.

“Mental distress or burnout is not a diagnosed mental health condition or disorder at the clinical level, but we do know that you're more likely to get anxious and depressed, and it's a negative trajectory from then on,” said Strudwick. “So if you're able to support people before things get worse, and hopefully be proactive, you won't necessarily have as many people experiencing that negative spiral into depression and anxiety.”

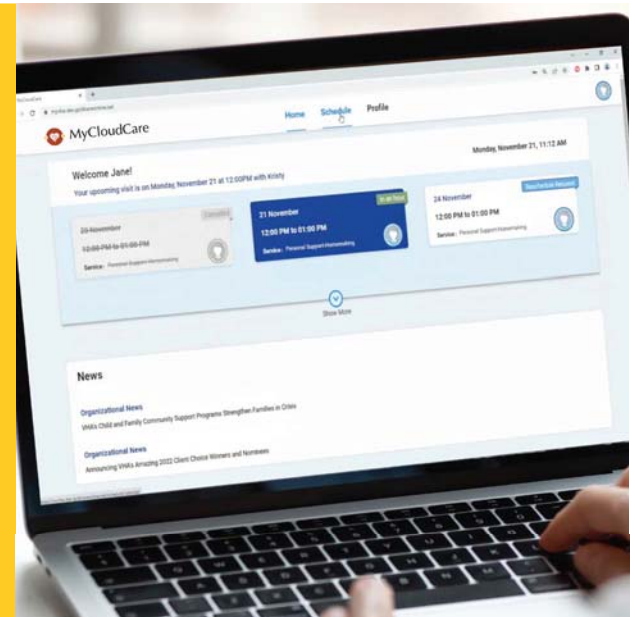


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