Barriers and Facilitators of Implementing Digital Mental Health Resources in Underserved Regions of Ontario during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract : A high prevalence of mental health problems was observed in marginalized youth living in underserved regions of Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic. To address this issue, a growing number of community-based traditional mental health services are offering digital mental health resources due to their accessibility, affordability, and scalability. The feasibility of providing these resources in underserved regions has been examined by researchers rather than by representatives of effective services within a mental health system. Indeed, digitalized mental health contents are not routinely embedded within local mental health organizations' services in Northern Ontario, where they can make a substantial impact. To date, many technology-based mental health initiatives have not been effectively implemented in this region. The obstacles associated with implementing digitalized mental health resources in Northern Ontario may be unique to that region. Thus, specific context-based considerations might need to be applied for developing and implementing digital resources by regional mental health organizations in Northern Ontario. The target population was child-serving organizations situated in northeastern Ontario, specifically within Greater Sudbury and the Sudbury District. A sample of six organizations were selected with representation from the mental health, social, and healthcare sectors. The project supervisor was in a unique position to access the organizations by virtue of existing relationships with the practice and lay communities at large. Thus, recruitment was conducted through professional outreach in partnership with the Center for Rural and Northern Health Research (CRaNHR). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 1-2 key personnel (e.g., administrator, clinician) from participating organizations. Audio recordings from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analyzed supported by NVivo. Thematic analysis of the data resulted in a total of 13 excerpts which were categorized into two major themes including 1) digital mental health services as a valuable resource for organizations both during and after the pandemic, and 2) barriers and facilitators to a successful implementation of digital mental health resources in northern Ontario. Four secondary themes were identified: 1) perceived barriers to implementation of digital mental health resources to the offered services by mental health agencies; 2) acceptability and feasibility of digital health sources for people living in northern Ontario; 3) data security, safety, and risk; and 4) connecting with clients. The employees of mental health organizations in northern Ontario considered digital mental health resources as generally acceptable to youth. However, they raised several concerns that may affect their implementation into routine practice and service delivery. The implementation of digital systems should be simple and straightforward and should enhance rather than hinder clinical workflows for staff. A clear plan for implementing technological services is also required for the successful adoption of digital systems. For successful adoption and implementation of digital systems, staff views must be considered.

Keywords : COVID-19 pandemic, digital mental health resources, Ontario, underserved