GEO NOVA SCOTIA
getting everyone online

Evaluation & Learning Report

2023-2024

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Introduction

WELCOME

This *Evaluation & Learning Report* is the next chapter in **GEO's Story of Transformation**. It tells the story of GEO's work for the 2023-24 fiscal year, with a bit extra if we knew something relevant at the time of writing.

The theme of this year's evaluation is *transforming systems*, and we asked people to tell us what (if anything) they noticed or experienced that suggested that is happening. As you look through this report, we invite you to keep an eye out for anything that feels transformational. We'd love to hear your thoughts about this.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people who are contributing so generously and so kindly to Digital Inclusion work in Nova Scotia. You have all contributed to this report as well, in one way or another: by being involved in the work directly, by championing the work, by participating in the evaluation, and by supporting each other on the journey to getting everyone online.

Thank you GEO Nova Scotia Participants, Referral Partners, Digital Champions, Business Partners, Government Partners, Board members, Insight Team members, and the Staff Team. It is an honour to hear your stories and thoughts, and to be trusted to pull them together.

Thank you to Neela Spurway, for so beautifully illustrating this next chapter in GEO's story. Thank you to Dean Gallant for such wonderful design work, and for thoughtful guidance and input on how to pull all of these pieces together. And thank you to our Evaluation & Learning Lead, Dr. Cari Patterson, for the immense amount of work and love that she put into creating this report.

IN CLOSING

We at GEO are grateful for all of the wisdom and passion that is the heart of this report. Thank you for your collective companionship on our continuing journey to transform lives through digital inclusion. We look forward to the next chapter of the story.

With love and kindness,

Matt Spurway
Executive Director, GEO Nova Scotia

June 3, 2024

HOW TO READ THE REPORT

The *Evaluation & Learning Report* is structured as a number of documents linked through an illustration. There are seven pictures you can click on from the illustration. These links will take you to the seven parts of the report:

- **Part 1: Who's Who**
- **Part 2: Outputs**
- **Part 3: Impacts**
- **Part 4: Stories**
- **Part 5: Infrastructure, Strengths & Challenges**
- **Part 6: Evaluation & Learning**
- **Part 7: Looking Ahead**

Each part of the report has hyperlinked layers so you can dig in anywhere you are interested in knowing more. If you read it all you may notice some repetition; we've tried our best to keep this to a minimum.

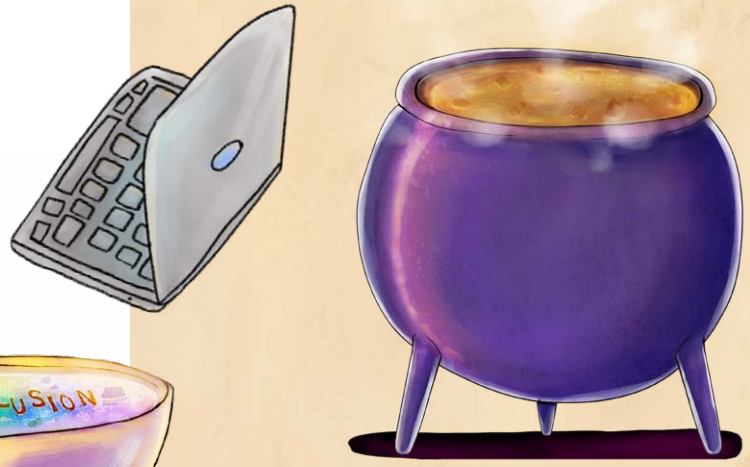
The report starts in the centre picture with the group around the soup pot, moves to the top right corner, then clockwise around the circle to the garden in the centre. However, you can start anywhere you like, go in any direction you please, or only look at the parts that interest you.

Use the back and forward arrows at the bottom right of each page to move through the report, and click on the illustration in the lower left corner of each page to navigate to the full report.

We offer an outline **here** for anyone who would like to see the overall content in one view or follow it that way.

Part 1 of the report includes a series of vignettes called Stone Soup Conversations. The information in the vignettes is drawn directly from actual comments in surveys, focus groups, and conversations. The conversations did not actually occur as presented here, and any names used are fictional. The vignette is meant to provide an overall sense of this group's thoughts about the collective Digital Inclusion work.

This is the first report we've done this way, and we'd love to hear your feedback.



ADDITIONAL NOTES

We draw on the story of **Stone Soup** as a metaphor for Digital Inclusion work because it shows the power and beauty of everyone coming together, contributing what they can, and all being nourished by what we have created collectively.

We talk about Digital Inclusion in our work and throughout this report. There are three components to DIgital Inclusion:

- **Internet Access**: everyone in Nova Scotia can have affordable access to the Internet.
- **Devices**: everyone in Nova Scotia can have an affordable device to get online.
- **Skills & Confidence**: everyone in Nova Scotia can have the basic skills and confidence they need to be online.

We draw on the story of **stone soup** to illustrate Digital Inclusion work because it shows the power and beauty of everyone coming together, contributing what they can, and all being nourished by what we have created collectively.

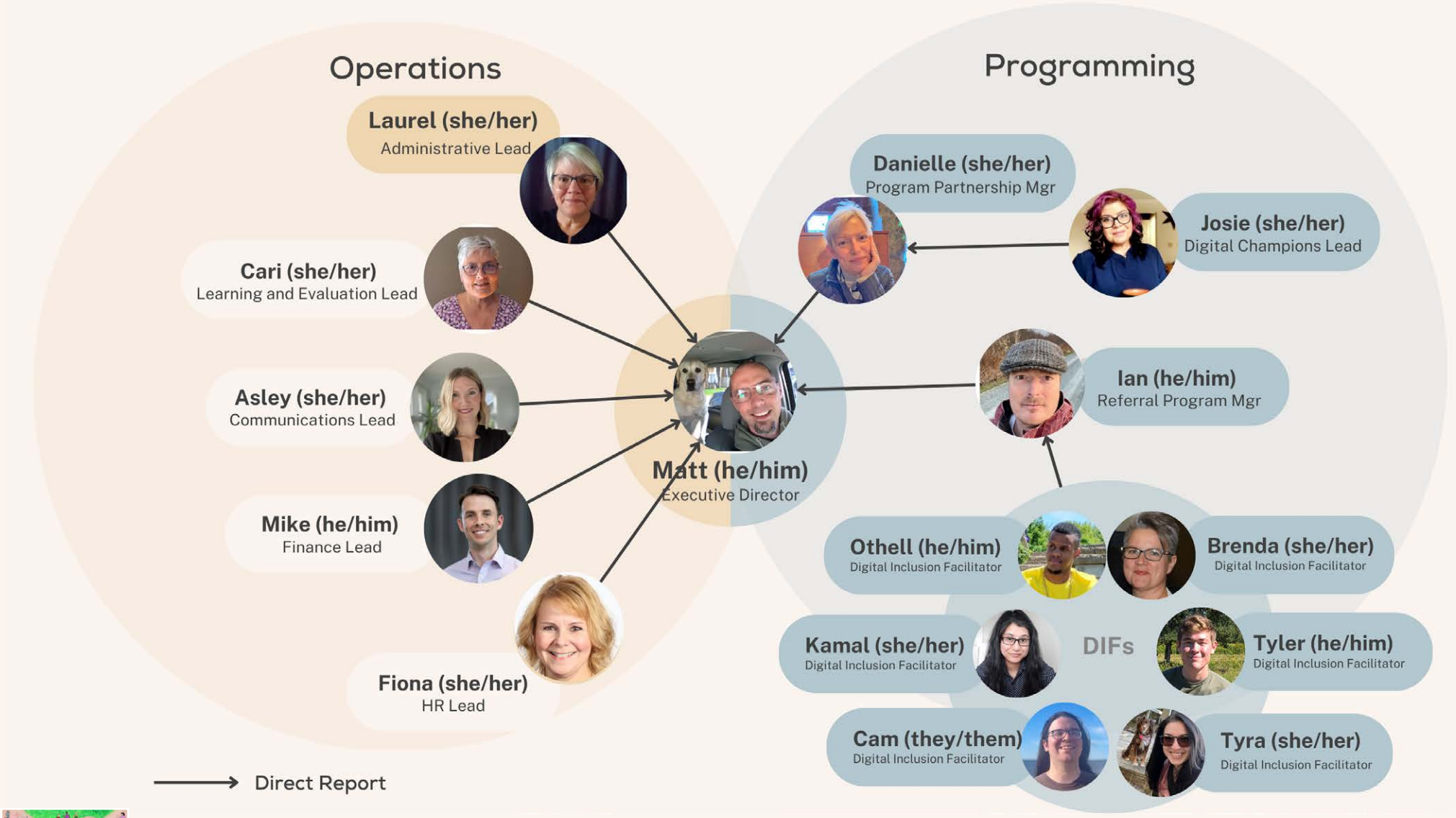
PART 1 Who's Who?

Over the past year, GEO and friends have been cooking up a giant, delicious pot of Digital Inclusion stone soup together. Each group of 'soup makers' has been adding their very own special ingredients, and the flavours are simmering and blending in very tasty ways.

- **GEO Team**
- **GEO Board of Directors**
- **GEO Insight Team**
- **GEO Government Partners**
- **GEO Business Partners**
- **GEO Referral Partners**
- **GEO Participants**

GEO Team

GEO ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



STONE SOUP CONVERSATIONS: GEO TEAM

The information in this vignette is drawn directly from actual comments in surveys, focus groups, and conversations. The conversations did not actually occur as presented here, and any names used are fictional. The vignette is meant to provide an overall sense of this group's thoughts about the collective Digital Inclusion work.

One by one the faces appeared on the screen and people greeted each other, as the GEO Team gathered virtually from their home offices across the province. This morning they were discussing their responses to a survey, part of GEO's evaluation process that feeds into the annual report to the community.

"Welcome, everyone!" the host's warm smile beamed through the screen. *"Today's agenda is a bit like a virtual potluck, where we'll share our reflections on the recent evaluation data and brainstorm ways to enhance our Digital Inclusion stone soup."*

"The survey reflects a ***growing awareness of Digital Inclusion****,"* remarked one of the team members, sharing her screen to reveal a word cloud that captured the most frequent responses. *"The terms 'awareness,' 'collaboration,' and 'impact' are prominently featured."*

"That's certainly been my experience," chimed a team member from their home office in Halifax. *"It seems like* ***everyone, from government partners to community members, is recognizing the importance of digital access and skills****."*

A team member joining from Cape Breton, added, *"I've also noticed* ***a shift in how people talk about Digital Inclusion****. It's no longer seen as an act of charity, but as a fundamental right, essential for full participation in society."*

The team delved deeper into the survey data, discussing the positive changes they had witnessed in the Digital Inclusion landscape.

*"The **increased collaboration between soup makers** is truly inspiring,"* shared a team member based in a small town. *"We're seeing **partnerships form across sectors, with businesses, nonprofits, and government** working together to bridge the digital divide."*

A team member from another small town nodded in agreement. *"And it's not just about pooling resources,"* they added. *"It's about **a shared commitment to learning and innovation, trying new approaches, and adapting** to the always changing digital landscape."*

The conversation then turned to the challenges that lay ahead.

*"The survey highlighted the **ongoing need for sustainable funding**,"* the host reminded the team. *"We need to explore creative solutions to ensure that our work can continue to thrive."*

"And we can't ever lose sight of the people who are still being left behind," a team member emphasized. *"The people being digitally excluded are not a homogenous group, and we need to **tailor our approaches to meet the diverse needs of different communities**."*

Always enthusiastic about doing their best work, the team started brainstorming ways to enhance their Digital Inclusion stone soup recipe. Ideas flowed freely, ranging from expanding their digital literacy programs to advocating for policy changes that would promote digital equity.

"Perhaps we could develop a series of online tutorials specifically for seniors," suggested a team member from a rural area.

"Or we could create a digital navigator program to guide people through the complex landscape of online resources," added one of the Halifax-based team members.

As the virtual meeting drew to a close, the team felt a sense of shared accomplishment and excitement for the future. They had not only savoured the progress they had made, but had also identified new spices and flavours to enhance their Digital Inclusion stone soup.

The host's voice filled the virtual room with warmth as she concluded the meeting. *"Let's continue to stir the pot together, with passion, creativity, and a deep commitment to equity. We'll keep working with the rest of the soup makers to make sure everyone has the opportunity to thrive in the digital age."*

GEO Board of Directors

The GEO Nova Scotia Board of Directors is dedicated to Digital Inclusion for all Nova Scotians, achieved through partnership and cooperation across sectors and across the province.

Sandra McKenzie
Board Chair

Lynne McCarron
HR Subcommittee Chair

Karn Nichols
Board Vice Chair, Strategic Planning Subcommittee Chair

Robert Patzelt
Governance Subcommittee Chair

Tim Sullivan
Board Treasurer/ Secretary, Finance Subcommittee Chair

Bonnie Ste-Croix
Lead Government Representative (ex-officio, non-voting)

STONE SOUP CONVERSATIONS: BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The information in this vignette is drawn directly from actual comments in surveys, focus groups, and conversations. The conversations did not actually occur as presented here, and any names used are fictional. The vignette is meant to provide an overall sense of this group's thoughts about the collective Digital Inclusion work.

The Digital Inclusion stone soup was simmering away beautifully, filling the air with the rich aroma of hope and promise. And the dedicated friends tending GEO knew that a delicious soup requires a watchful eye and a thoughtful hand to keep it from burning.

On a crisp spring evening, GEO's Board members, a close-knit group of seasoned friends, gathered around a crackling campfire. They each held a steaming mug of Digital Inclusion stone soup, a symbolic reminder of the collective effort that had brought them this far.

As the conversation flowed, the friends reflected on the successes and challenges of their journey. They celebrated the **many lives touched, the newfound access and independence experienced**, and the **growing recognition of Digital Inclusion as a fundamental right**. They also acknowledged the persistent hurdles: the **rural communities without connectivity**, the **financial burdens** faced by those most in need, and the daunting **digital literacy gap** that threatened to leave some behind.

With a shared sense of purpose and a deep-rooted belief in the power of community, the friends turned their attention to the future. **They envisioned a GEO that would not only continue to provide essential resources but also become a driving force of advocacy, innovation, and sustainability**. They brainstormed creative solutions to tackle affordability, expand digital literacy initiatives, and forge stronger partnerships with friends in government and business.

The campfire glowed brighter as the discussion grew more passionate. The GEO friends recognized that the journey towards true digital equity was an ongoing one, and **it would need constant adaptation, collaboration, and a willingness to learn from successes and setbacks**.

One by one, the friends shared their hopes and aspirations for GEO's future:

"Imagine a province where every community, no matter how remote, has access to affordable, high-speed Internet," said one.

"Let's create a comprehensive digital literacy program that empowers individuals of all ages and backgrounds to navigate the online world with confidence," said another friend, whose belly was feeling warm from the soup.

"We can ***become a leading voice for Digital Inclusion****, influencing policy decisions and inspiring others to join our cause,"* a friend said enthusiastically.

As the night wore on, a collective vision emerged—one of a future where the Digital Inclusion stone soup would continue to nourish and uplift communities, and digital equity was not just a goal but a reality.

With renewed energy and a shared sense of purpose, the friends rose from the campfire, ready to tackle the challenges ahead. They knew that the path forward would not be easy, but they also knew that **working with all of GEO's friends, they could create a brighter, more inclusive digital future for Nova Scotia**.

GEO Insight Team

Aaron Slater
Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations

Alexander MacDougall
NS Department of Education & Early Childhood Development

Amr ElKhashab
P4G

Blake Ross
Maritime Design

Bette Watson-Borg
Maple Key Coaching, Leadership & Evaluation for Social Change

Craig Menzies
MindSea

Diana Parks
Davis Pier

Drew Ritchie
Cox and Palmer

Jennifer Hoegg
Strategic and Critical Thinker

Jodene Dunleavy
Write Inc

Kelli Woo Shue
Nova Scotia Public Library

Maura McGowan
Tech Program/Project Manager

Mario Rolle
Nuleaf Counselling & Consultancy

Teri-Lynn Dempsey
DataGuide Technologies

STONE SOUP CONVERSATIONS: INSIGHT TEAM

The information in this vignette is drawn directly from actual comments in surveys, focus groups, and conversations. The conversations did not actually occur as presented here, and any names used are fictional. The vignette is meant to provide an overall sense of this group's thoughts about the collective Digital Inclusion work.

The warm spring sun shone brightly as members of GEO's Insight Team gathered for a potluck in a lush community garden. In the midst of the early flowers and the buzzing of some sleepy bumble bees, they laid out a feast of shared dishes, reflecting the diverse perspectives and expertise that enriched their work together.

This wasn't just any potluck; it was a celebration of growth, connection, and the transformative power of Digital Inclusion stone soup. As they savoured the flavours of local ingredients and homemade treats, the conversation turned to the remarkable changes they had witnessed since starting their journey together.

One of the friends talked about **GEO's growth from an idea to a healthy organization with its roots firmly planted in the values of love and kindness**.

Another friend was very pleased about the **growing awareness and focus on Digital Inclusion across the province**.

Yet another friend, a relative newcomer to the group, shared their surprise at the **genuine collaboration they had witnessed between sectors** that had traditionally operated in silos. They spoke of the "stone soup" mentality—the willingness to pool resources, knowledge, and expertise for the greater good—that had become the hallmark of GEO's approach.

As the afternoon wore on, the conversation deepened. The friends reflected on the direct impact of GEO's work—**the folks empowered by having digital access, the strengthened connections between communities**, and the **ripple effect of positive change** that extended beyond the people who were getting connected to devices and Internet service, to everyone involved in Digital Inclusion stone soup.

And they acknowledged the challenges that lay ahead. They recognized the **need to balance rapid growth with sustainable practices**, to **refine their processes as the scale of GEO's operations expanded**, and to **make sure the values that had guided them from the beginning remained at the heart of their work**.

One of the friends who was passionate about storytelling emphasized how important it is to **capture the human impact of their efforts**. *"Picture a future where data-driven narratives and stories show that Digital Inclusion transforms lives. Others will join in the work, and together we'll be able to influence policy decisions at the highest levels."*

As the potluck wrapped up, the Insight Team understood that like the ingredients in stone soup, their individual contributions, when combined, created something far greater than the sum of its parts.

As they packed up their dishes and said farewell, the lingering scents of shared food and shared purpose filled the air. **The Digital Inclusion stone soup, it seemed, was not only nourishing individuals and communities—it was also nurturing the very relationships and collaborations that made the work possible**. The seeds of digital equity, planted with care and tended with passion, were beginning to blossom, promising a brighter future for everyone.

GEO Government Partners

The **NS Department of Community Services** has provided the majority of GEO's funding since 2022.

Starting in 2024, GEO is receiving four years of funding from the **NS Advisory Council on the Status of Women** through the Canada-Nova Scotia Action Plan to End Gender-based Violence.

In 2023-2024, GEO engaged several other Departments in thought partnership and ongoing, deepening conversations about Digital Inclusion in Nova Scotia, and how to best work together to get everyone online, including **Department of Cyber Security & Digital Solutions**, **Department of Education & Early Childhood Development**, **Department of Labour, Skills & Immigration**, **Department of Seniors & Long-term Care**, and the **Office of Addictions & Mental Health**.

NOVA SCOTIA

Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women

STONE SOUP CONVERSATIONS: GOVERNMENT PARTNERS

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The virtual meeting room hummed with energy as government partners from across departments gathered to reflect about the Digital Inclusion work in the province being led by GEO NS. They saw it as a modern-day "stone soup" simmering with transformative potential.

"Welcome everyone!" A cheerful voice cut through the virtual air, setting a welcoming tone for the meeting. *"Today is a celebration of our collective efforts, a chance to talk about progress we've made, and look ahead to the next exciting chapter in our Digital Inclusion story."*

Folks from various departments chimed in with greetings and enthusiastic nods, eager to contribute their unique perspectives.

"The impact of our shared efforts is evident in the remarkable changes we've witnessed," a partner from one department noted, the excitement palpable. ***"Employment support programs are reaching more people than ever before, thanks to the accessibility of online delivery."***

Another partner added, *"And we're seeing* ***students and families who were once on the wrong side of the digital divide now engaging in online learning, extracurricular activities, and staying connected with loved ones*** *across the province."*

A murmur of excitement ran through the virtual room as others shared stories of the ripple effects of their collaborative efforts.

"Our ***career development programs are now accessible to individuals in even the most remote corners of the province,"*** added a third partner with pride.

"And thanks to our partnership with GEO," another added, *"we are* ***empowering women experiencing gender-based violence with mobile data and devices, opening doors to education and economic empowerment that were previously closed."***

The conversation naturally flowed to the **evolving**

dynamics between different sectors.

"We're engaging in meaningful dialogues with Mental Health and Addictions about integrating Digital Inclusion into their services," shared a departmental representative. *"It's a testament to the growing recognition that **digital access is a key ingredient in overall well-being**."*

Someone added, *"The barriers that once separated departments are crumbling. We're **finding common ground and realizing that collaboration is the secret ingredient to lasting change**."*

As the virtual gathering continued, the government partners reflected on the most satisfying outcomes of their Digital Inclusion efforts.

"The life-changing impact on people who are now connected is truly heartwarming," a partner from a large department added, the emotion evident. *"Knowing that we're making a real difference in people's lives is what fuels our passion."*

"And the engagement of everyone involved is inspiring," shared an enthusiastic partner. *"It speaks to the power of collective action and the belief that **by working together we can create a more inclusive and equitable province**."*

"I hope our Digital Inclusion stone soup continues to simmer," said one of the partners. *"I hope we can continue to add new ingredients, experiment with bold flavours, and share the nourishing results with everyone in the province."*

"Our hearts are full of hope and our spoons are poised for action!" they laughed easily together, ready for the next chapter.

GEO Business Partners

GEO works closely with several partners in the private sector:

Data Guide Technologies provides hardware, software, storage, shipping, and IT services.

Eastlink provides Internet service, mobile service, customer service, and refurbished smartphones.

IMP Solutions provides devices, storage, and shipping.

Mhor Collective is a social enterprise based in Scotland and provides Digital Champions training and Digital Inclusion resources.

Orchard provides refurbished smartphones and iPads.

Seaside provides Internet service and customer service in Cape Breton.

The monetary value of Business Partners' discounts and added value for GEO totaled more than **$500,000** in 2023-24. This helps GEO extend programming and connect many more Participants!

STONE SOUP CONVERSATIONS: BUSINESS PARTNERS

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GEO's Business Partners recently got together over steaming bowls of hot soup that smelled really delicious, and they talked about Digital Inclusion.

"Wow," said one of the friends, *"I just realized that I take Internet/mobility for granted every day; now I can see how difficult it would be for people who don't have access."*

They were excited about the tangible impact of their contributions on extending GEO's reach and directly improving lives.

"It's amazing to see how our contributions allow GEO to extend its programming and how many lives we can change working together" they said.

The friends saw that together they had more power to impact digital inclusion than they had working alone. *"We're one ingredient in the soup - all of us make the soup together in the end - none of this would work if we didn't make the soup together".*

When they thought about it a little bit more, they started to recognize all the ways they were being nourished by the soup themselves.

"A lot of the customers through GEO were past customers who couldn't pay their bills, and they are now coming back to our family - that creates value for us," said one of the friends who provides Internet service.

"Now we can offer TV services to our customers because they first have to have Internet connected," said another friend who provides Internet.

"Working with GEO helps solidify our position as a Standing Offer vendor of choice for the provincial government. Working on Digital Inclusion demonstrates our commitment/social duty to help out," said another friend who provides devices.

"We are shifting our thinking about how to work with the private sector, and international markets are opening up for us" said the friends in Scotland who share their expertise and connections with GEO.

The friends thought about their experiences working as partners.

"The good experiences we have together build trust. We can reach out to each other and to organizations involved with GEO for assistance when needed and have a good experience".

"We love the constant learning from GEO - we reflect on what GEO is doing and the processes GEO follows like the evaluation apporach and the person-centred approach, and think about how we can use these best practices in our own work" they acknowledged.

Finally, the friends thought together about what they wanted everyone to know about the Digital Inclusion stone soup work.

"Tell more stories," said one friend, *"the stories show everyone the impact of having devices and Internet access on people's lives".* Another friend jumped in. *"The stories of change helps us feel like we are part of something bigger".*

"We're bringing access to everybody, not just those who can pay", said another friend.

"We're changing lives - making Nova Scotia and Canada stronger, and that makes a world of difference," they agreed together.

GEO Referral Partners

Adsum Court

Adult Learning Association of Cape Breton

Africadian Empowerment Academy

Alice House

Ally Centre of Cape Breton

Antigonish County Adult Learning Association

Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth

Autism Nova Scotia

Autumn House

Black Educators Association

Breton Ability Centre

Bryony House

Cumberland Adult Network for Upgrading (CAN-U)

Cape Breton Food Hub

Cape Breton Community Housing Association

Cape Breton Transition House Association

Chebucto Connections

Chebucto Links

Chrysalis House

CMHA Halifax-Dartmouth

CMHA Nova Scotia

Colchester Adult Learning Association

Community INC

Dartmouth Learning Network

Demetreous Lane Tenants Association

Digby Area Learning Association

East Preston Family Resource Centre

Eskasoni Mental Health

Farm to Feast Café Association

Futureworx

Guysborough Adult Learning Association

Halifax Refugee Clinic

Harbour House

Healthy Minds Cooperative

In The Works

Inverness County Literacy

Jane Paul Indigenous Women's Resource Centre

Job Junction

John Howard Society of Nova Scotia

Juniper House

Kids Action Program

Leeside Transition House

Literacy Nova Scotia

Metroworks

Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre

Mi'kmaq Native Healing Centre – Millbrook

Mi'kmaq Native Healing Centre – We'koqma'q

Mountains and Meadows Care Group

Naomi Society

New Dawn Enterprises

Nisa Homes

North Grove

Nova Scotia Association of Black Social Workers

NPower Canada

Our House Youth Wellness Centre

Out Of The Cold

The Overlook

Pathways to Education

Pathways to Employment

Phoenix Learning and Employment Centre

Prescott Group

Preston Area Learning Skills Society

Public Good Society of Dartmouth

Queens Learning Network

Reachability

SchoolsPlus

7th Step Society of Nova Scotia

Shelburne Association Supporting Inclusion

Shelburne County Learning Network

Shelter Nova Scotia

SHYFT Youth Services

Solutions Learning

South Shore Open Doors Association

Stepping Stone

Teamworks Cooperative

Tearmann Society

Third Place Transition Housing

Unity Charity

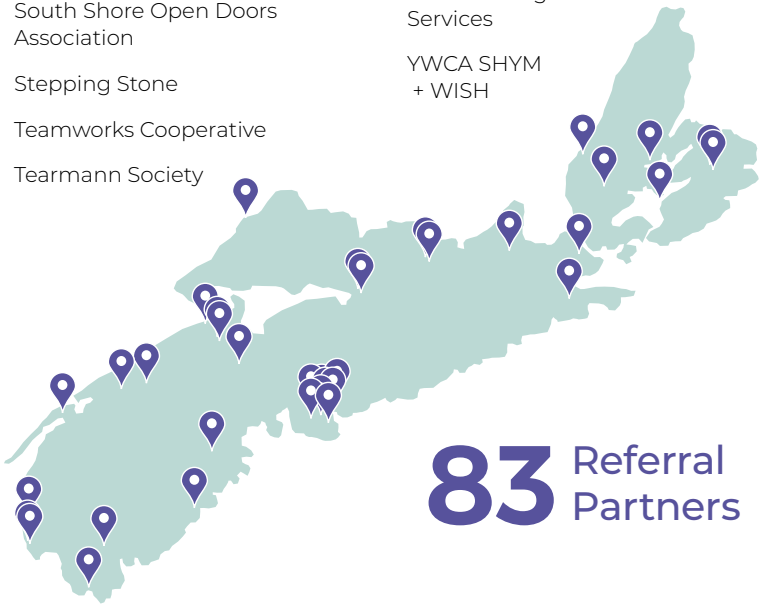
Valley Community Learning Association

Victoria County Home Support Services

Yarmouth County Learning Network

YMCA Immigrant Services

YWCA SHYM + WISH



83 Referral Partners

STONE SOUP CONVERSATIONS: REFERRAL PARTNERS

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You could feel the energy as the GEO Referral Partners joined the virtual potluck of ideas and experiences. Faces beamed from screens across the province, each representing a unique ingredient in the Digital Inclusion stone soup.

"Let's start with the great progress we're making together," their host suggested. "Let's share some stories about how the stone soup is nourishing our communities, one digital connection at a time."

"Remember that senior I worked with who was too nervous to even open a laptop?" a community worker shared with a hint of pride in her voice. "Now she's having ***video chats with her grandchildren*** *every week."*

A social worker, her face glowing with enthusiasm, added, *"And that young newcomer who struggled with isolation? They're now* ***connected to a vibrant online community, learning new skills and building friendships****."*

"I'll never forget the look on a young man's face when he ***completed his first online job application****,"* shared a beaming career counselor. *"It was a moment of pure empowerment."*

The virtual potluck continued, each partner sharing a story of how they had seen Digital Inclusion transform lives.

"We're seeing people ***gain the confidence to connect with loved ones, access vital services, and even advocate for themselves*** *online,"* a passionate community advocate shared.

"We've seen ***women gain confidence, access essential services, and even launch small businesses online****,"* a representative from a women's shelter shared, her voice filled with hope.

A family support worker chimed in, *"And many of our families who couldn't afford the Internet now have **access to telehealth appointments and educational resources for their children**. It's life-changing."*

"And it's not just about individual success," added a librarian, her screen showcasing a Digital Champion training in progress.

However, the conversation wasn't just about successes. The Referral Partners recognized the simmering challenges that remained, the spices that needed adjusting to perfect the Digital Inclusion recipe.

*"The **cost of Internet access is still a significant barrier** for many,"* said a community learning organization partner. *"We need to continue advocating for affordable options for everyone."*

*"The **lack of reliable Internet in certain areas is a major roadblock**,"* a concerned voice chimed in. *"We need innovative solutions like mobile hotspots to reach people in those underserved communities."*

*"**And we can't forget about the importance of ongoing support**,"* another partner emphasized. *"**Digital skills need to be nurtured and refreshed** because things change so fast and there's always something new to learn."*

"Yes," added a partner from a very busy community organization *"and we **don't always have the time** to show people what they want to learn."*

*"And we must **continue to build trust and understanding** within communities,"* another partner emphasized. *"**Digital literacy isn't just about technical skills**; it's about empowering people to navigate the online world safely and confidently."*

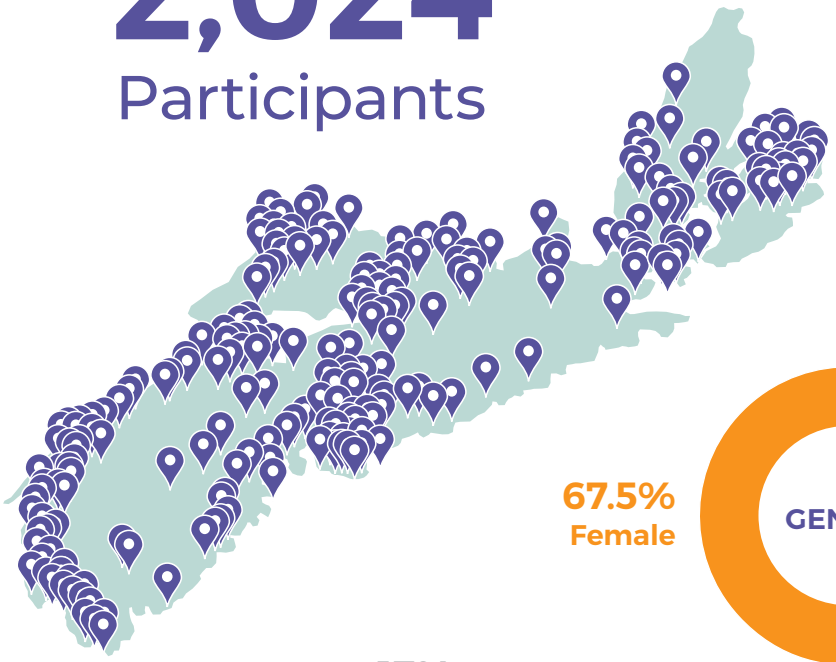
"Our partnership with GEO has been a game-changer," said a partner from a rural community centre. *"We're not just closing the digital divide; we're **opening doors to education, employment, and a whole new world of possibilities**."*

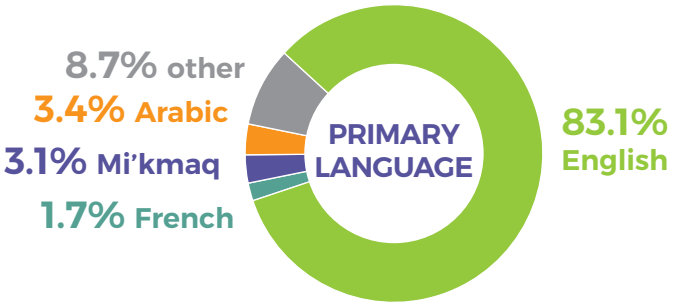
"And the ripple effects are spreading far and wide," a school partner added, her face beaming with pride. *"We're seeing **increased engagement, collaboration, and a renewed sense of empowerment in our communities**."*

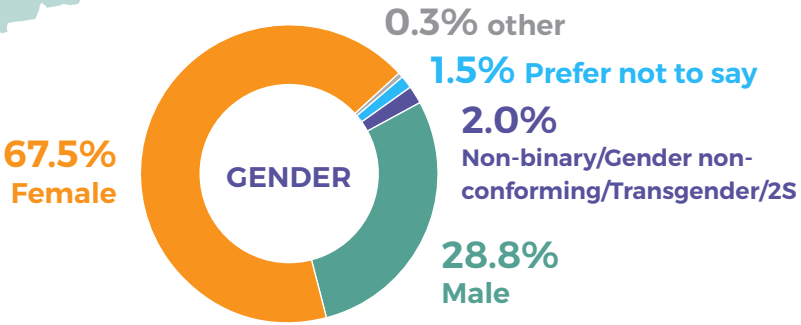
As the last virtual handshake was exchanged, the partners knew that their work was far from done. But with each story shared, each challenge identified, and each potential solution articulated, they felt a renewed sense of possibility. The Digital Inclusion stone soup was still simmering, and they were committed to adding their own special ingredients, ensuring that it continued to nourish and sustain their communities for years to come.

GEO Participants

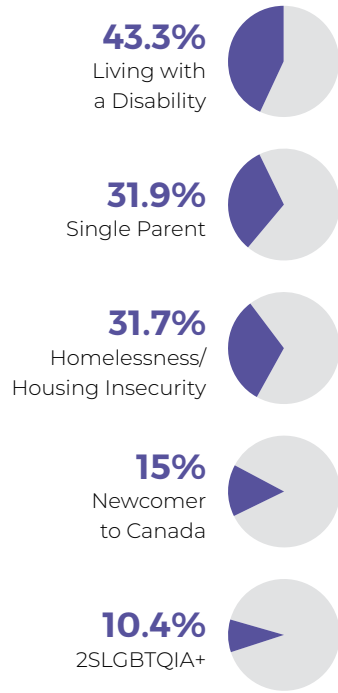
2,024
Participants

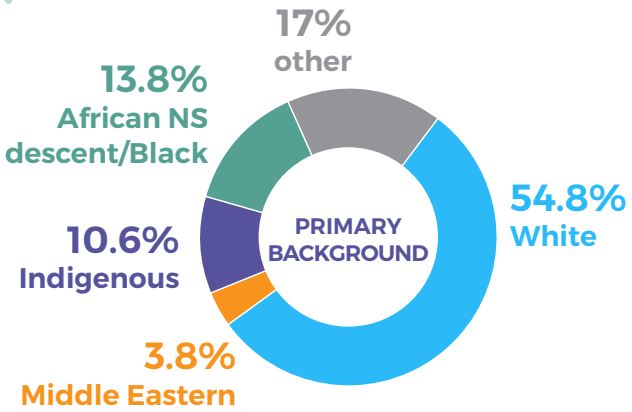


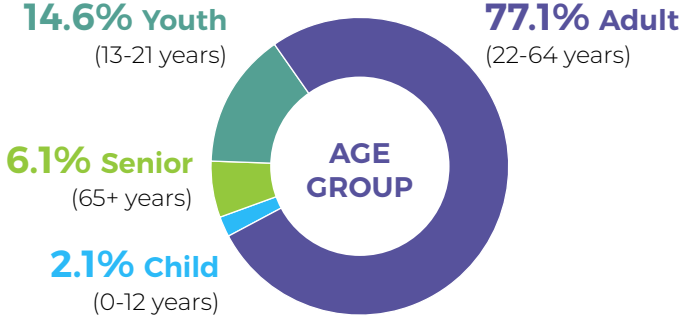




LIVED EXPERIENCE







STONE SOUP CONVERSATIONS: PARTICIPANTS

The information in this vignette is drawn directly from actual comments in surveys, focus groups, and conversations. The conversations did not actually occur as presented here, and any names used are fictional. The vignette is meant to provide an overall sense of this group's thoughts about the collective Digital Inclusion work.

The community room buzzed with anticipation. It was no ordinary GEO meeting. Today, Participants would share their stories—real experiences of how Internet access had changed their lives. The air crackled with a mix of nervousness and pride.

The facilitator smiled warmly. *"Welcome, everyone. This is your space, your voices. Let's paint a picture of what Digital Inclusion really means."*

Maria, a grandmother from a remote rural community, took a deep breath. *"Before GEO, I felt like I was on an island. My family was scattered across the country, and the only way to stay in touch was through expensive long-distance calls. Now, with my Chromebook and the Internet,* ***I see my grandchildren's faces every week*** *on video calls. It's almost a miracle."*

Her eyes sparkled. *"****I even joined an online knitting group!*** *Turns out, there are other grandmas out there who love the same silly patterns I do. It's like I found a new family."*

Ahmed, a young man with a passion for environmental activism, leaned forward. *"I used to feel so powerless. I knew things were wrong in the city - pollution, lack of resources – but I didn't know where to turn. Now, I have a voice.* ***I can research issues****, connect with other activists, and even start petitions online. We made the local news last month with our campaign to save our community garden,"* he said. *"****Information is power, and the Internet gave me that power****."*

David, a high school student with dreams of becoming a doctor, beamed with excitement. *"Before getting online, I felt so limited. Our school library is small, and the textbooks are outdated. Now,* ***I have the entire world of knowledge at my fingertips****. I can research different medical specialties, watch educational videos, and even take online courses from top universities."*

His eyes widened. *"****I discovered a scholarship program for aspiring doctors*** *from underrepresented groups. Without the Internet, I would have never known about it. It's my ticket to a brighter future."*

Sofia, a single mother and aspiring entrepreneur, shared her story with a mix of vulnerability and pride. *"I always dreamed of starting my own business, but I didn't know where to begin. With the Internet,* ***I found resources, online courses, and even a community of other entrepreneurs****. I launched my online jewelry store last year, and it's been a lifesaver."*

Her voice cracked with emotion. *"I can finally provide for my children and pursue my passion.* ***The Internet has given me a chance to create a better life****."*

Taylor, a young transgender person living in a rural area, spoke softly but with newfound confidence. *"Before the Internet, I felt so alone. There were no resources or support groups for 2SLGBTQIA+ people in my town. Online,* ***I found a community that understood me, a place where I could be myself without fear of judgment. It saved my life****."*

Their eyes shone with gratitude. *"The Internet* ***connected me with a therapist who specializes in gender identity issues, and I even found a virtual support group*** *where I can share my experiences and learn from others.* ***It's like having a family I never knew existed****."*

Jasmine, a single mother of three, spoke with quiet determination. *"I was struggling to make ends meet, working multiple low-paying jobs. With the Internet, I* ***discovered online learning platforms and training programs****. I learned new skills, got certified in web design, and* ***landed a remote job with a flexible schedule****."*

Her voice filled with hope. *"Now, I can work from home, take care of my children, and earn a decent living.* ***The Internet has broken the cycle of poverty for my family****."*

Michael, a man without secure housing, shared his story with raw honesty. *"Living rough is isolating and dangerous. The Internet has become a lifeline for me. I can* ***access shelters and resources, apply for jobs, and even stay connected with my family****."*

His eyes held a flicker of determination. *"I know it's not a perfect solution, but it's a start. With access to information and support, I'm one step closer to getting back on my feet."*

James, an older gentleman who recently retired, spoke with a hint of frustration. *"I'm grateful for the Internet. It helps me* ***stay connected with my family and friends****, and I enjoy learning new things online. But* ***it can be overwhelming****. There's so much information out there, and it's hard to know what's trustworthy."*

He shook his head. *"I worry about scams and identity theft. I **wish there were more resources to help seniors** like me navigate the digital world safely and confidently."*

Janice, a woman with a disability, spoke softly but with determination. *"Having the Internet has opened up so many doors for me. I can **order groceries online, access healthcare information, and even take online courses to improve my job skills**. But it's not always easy. Many websites aren't designed for people like me, and **sometimes the connection is slow and unreliable**."*

Her words hung in the air, a reminder that Digital Inclusion wasn't just about access; it was also about equity and accessibility for all.

Emily, a young woman struggling with anxiety, shared her story with a mix of vulnerability and relief. *"The isolation of the pandemic made my anxiety worse. I felt trapped in a cycle of worry and despair. But then **I found online therapy sessions and peer support groups**. It was a lifeline."*

Her voice softened. *"Connecting with others who understood my struggles, and having a safe space to talk about my feelings, made all the difference. I **learned coping mechanisms and developed a support network**, and I'm starting to heal."*

Jonathon, a bright-eyed 12-year-old, grinned as he talked about his ChromeBook. *"It's awesome. I can do **my homework, research anything I'm curious about, watch videos, and even do projects** with my friends."*

His mother chimed in, *"His **grades have improved, and he's more engaged in learning**. It's opened up a whole new world of possibilities for him."*

Lily, a mother of a child with autism, shared her story with a mix of hope and gratitude. *"My son struggles to communicate verbally, and it was heartbreaking to see him feel so frustrated. But then GEO helped us get an iPad and some apps that help him express his needs and emotions.."*

Tears welled up in her eyes. ***"He's now able to communicate, learn, and connect with the world in a way that was never possible before. It's changed our lives**."*

Sarah, a survivor of gender-based violence, spoke with newfound strength. *"When I fled my abusive partner, I had nothing but the clothes on my back. The mobile phone and data plan I received from GEO were a lifeline. **I could call for help, find a shelter, and start rebuilding my life**."*

Her voice trembled with emotion. *"The support I received from the GEO helped me feel confident using my phone right away. I'm so grateful for their kindness and compassion."*

Everyone in the room was feeling very moved by the stories people had shared so generously. The facilitator spoke up. *"Your stories are the heart of our Digital Inclusion stone soup. Thank you for sharing so generously."*

She continued, *"For organizations like GEO and our Referral Partners, your **stories inform our programs and services**. They help us understand the diverse needs of our communities and tailor our approach accordingly."*

*"For government partners, your **stories highlight the importance of investing in digital infrastructure and providing affordable access for all**. They show the gaps in digital literacy training and support for equity-deserving communities."*

*"For businesses, your **stories demonstrate the importance of designing affordable and inclusive products and services that work for diverse users**, including people with disabilities, seniors, and people living in challenging circumstances."*

*"These stories are not just inspiring; they're a call to action. **We have a collective responsibility to bridge the digital divide**, to ensure that everyone has the tools and skills they need to thrive in the digital age."*

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS - DETAILS

Age Group

Child (0-12) **41** (2.1%)
Youth (13-24) **278** (14.6%)
Adult (25-64) **1,472** (77.1%)
Senior (65+) **117** (6.1%)

Gender

Female **1,346** (67.5%)
Male **575** (28.8%)
Non-binary/Gender non-conforming/
Transgender/2S **38** (2.0%)
Other **5** (0.3%)
Prefer not to say **30** (1.5%)

Primary Language

Arabic **67** (3.4%)
English **1,652** (83.1%)
Farsi **8** (0.4%)
French **33** (1.7%)
Hindi **6** (0.3%)
Korean **13** (0.7%)
Malayalam **4** (0.2%)
Mandarin **3** (0.2%)
Mi'kmaq **62** (3.1%)
Other **44** (2.2%)
Portuguese **5** (0.3%)
Punjabi **1** (0.1%)
Russian **5** (0.3%)
Somali **23** (1.2%)
Spanish **18** (0.9%)
Swahili **17** (0.9%)
Tagalog (Filipino) **2** (0.1%)
Turkish **1** (0.1%)
Ukrainian **20** (1.0%)
Urdu **1** (0.1%)
Vietnamese **3** (0.2%)

LIVED EXPERIENCE

Homelessness/Housing Insecurity

Yes **621** (31.7%)
No **1,191** (60.7%)
Not comfortable answering **150** (7.6%)

2SLGBTQIA+

Yes **199** (10.4%)
No **1,510** (79.0%)
Not comfortable answering **203** (10.6%)

Living with a Disability

Yes **837** (43.3%)
No **928** (48.0%)
Not comfortable answering **167** (8.6%)

Newcomer

Yes **289** (15.0%)
No **1,532** (79.6%)
Not comfortable answering **103** (5.4%)

Single Parent

Yes **623** (31.9%)
No **1,202** (61.6%)
Not comfortable answering **125** (6.4%)

Primary Background

African Nova Scotian descent **130** (6.5%)

Black (e.g. African, Afro-Caribbean,
African Canadian descent) **146** (7.3%)

East/Southeast Asian (e.g. Chinese,
Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese descent or Filipino,
Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai,
Indone **42** (2.1%)

Indigenous (e.g. First Nations,
Inuk/Inuit, Métis descent) **211** (10.6%)

Jewish **1** (0.1%)

Latino (e.g. Latin American,
Hispanic descent) **26** (1.3%)

Middle Eastern (e.g. Arab, Persian, West
Asian descent - i.e. Afghan, Egyptian,
Iranian, Lebanese, Turkish, Kurdish) . . **76** (3.8%)

Other **47** (2.4%)

Prefer not to say **171** (8.6%)

South Asian (e.g. South Asian descent -
i.e. East Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi,
Sri Lankan, Indo-Caribbean) **17** (0.9%)

Unknown **37** (1.9%)

White (e.g. European descent) **1,094** (54.8%)

PART 2 Outputs

Making the Digital Inclusion stone soup together, we are getting more people online across Nova Scotia.

- **Devices & Connections**
- **Program Partnerships**
- **Digital Skills**

Devices & Connections

2023-2024- DEVICES & CONNECTIONS DISTRIBUTED

1,728 Chromebooks and headsets

34 iPads

247 laptops and headsets

1,359 Internet connections

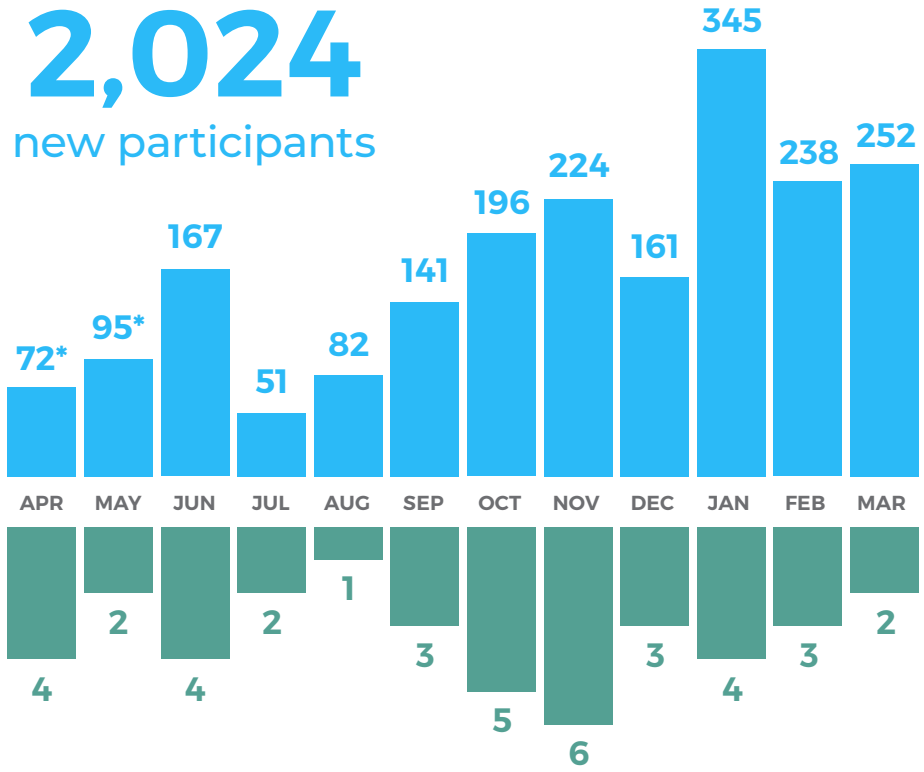
126 phone plans activated

168 smartphones

** April and May totals may not be completely accurate due to the integration of different information management systems. Actual numbers may be higher.*

2,024 new participants

GEO PARTICIPANTS



39 new registered Referral Partners

Program Partnerships

When GEO Referral Partners are able to contribute funding to help their program participants access devices and Internet accounts, they work with GEO to create a Program Partnership. This allows the partner organization to receive and direct more Digital Inclusion support to their participants.

In 2023-2024, Program Partnerships contributed a total of $36,000 to Digital Inclusion stone soup, directly supporting their participants accessing devices and Internet through GEO.

Partner: **Unity Charity**

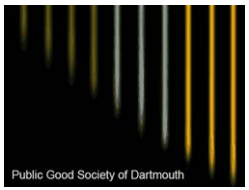
Output: 40 Chromebooks and headsets

Program: "The Source", a virtual Hip Hop programming facilitated by African Nova Scotian Hip Hop artists and serving African Nova Scotian youth (ages 14-19) living in rural communities.

Partner: **Chebucto Links**

Output: 10 Chromebooks and headsets

Program: "Chromebooks for Seniors", providing devices and training to Seniors in HRM.



Partner: **Public Good Society of Dartmouth**

Output: 20 iPads, cases, and apps

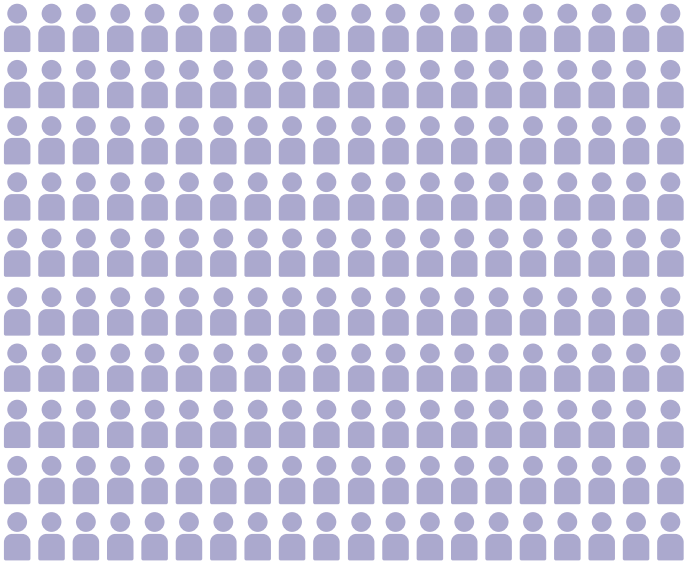
Program: "Equipping Students for Success 2023", providing iPads to students with disabilities and living in households with low incomes across Nova Scotia, including durable cases and licenses to specialty apps like Proloquo2Go which are used for non-verbal communication.

Digital Skills

DIGITAL SKILLS TRAINING SESSIONS OFFERED

TYPE OF TRAINING	# OF SESSIONS	# OF PARTICIPANTS
Digital Champions Core Training	8	18
Digital Champions for Newcomers (DC4NC)	8	77
DC4NC Train the Trainer for Digital Literacy Exchange Program (DLEP) Partners	4	23
DC4N by DLEP partners in BC and AB	–	56
Digital Champions: Seniors Focus	1	7
Digital Inclusion Facilitators (DIF) Training: Youth Focus	2	13
DIF Training: Pathways to Employment	1	6
Total	24	200

24 training sessions



200 training participants

PART 3 Impacts

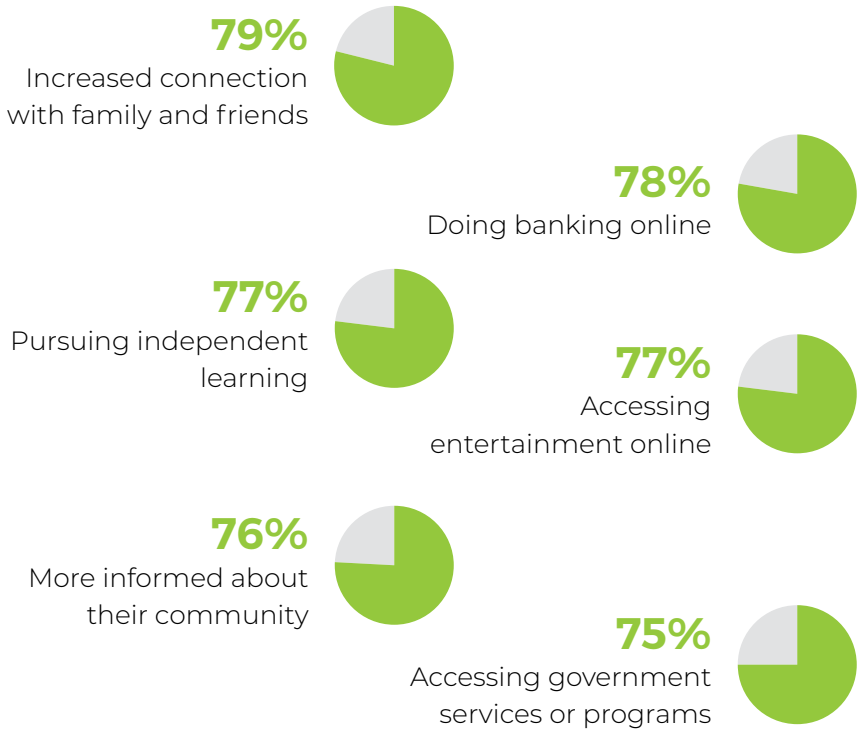
The Digital Inclusion stone soup is nourishing all of us in different ways and making a difference in people's lives.

- **Impacts on Participants**
- **Impacts on Community Organizations**
- **Impacts on Business Partners**
- **Impacts on Government Partners**

Impacts on Participants

A total of **365 Participants** responded to our survey. We asked them how their lives were impacted by having devices and Internet access. They rated their agreement with a number of impact statements (which we drew from their open-ended responses to this question in last year's evaluation). Participants could also identify other impacts.

The top six impacts they identified (by saying they somewhat or strongly agreed with the statements) were:



This table shows Participants' ratings of agreement on all of the impact statements.

	STRONGLY DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER DISAGREE NOR AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	DOESN'T APPLY TO ME
I am more connected with family and friends				16%	63%	
I do my banking online				11%	67%	
I pursue independent learning				23%	54%	
I access entertainment online (e.g., movies, games)				14%	63%	
I am more informed about my community				22%	54%	
I have accessed other government services or programs				18%	57%	
I am less isolated				17%	56%	
My lifestyle has improved				21%	52%	
I can stretch my budget to cover other expenses				13%	59%	
I have accessed health/mental health services				14%	54%	
I am participating in training and/or education				14%	52%	
I am building job skills				15%	44%	
I am more involved in strengthening my community				24%	38%	
I have fewer barriers (e.g., transportation, childcare) to participating in community programs				21%	35%	
I can better meet the needs of my children				13%	38%	
I can maintain a job				11%	32%	

In Participants' open-ended comments,

31% emphasized the importance of having devices and the Internet for doing homework, schoolwork, independent learning, accessing educational resources, and taking online courses.

"My kids are using Chromebooks at school, it's nice to have that at home as well. They use it for educational purposes, reading/listening to online books, or playing learn-to-read games."

25% highlighted the importance of Internet access for staying connected with loved ones, managing social interactions, and maintaining well-being

"I can keep in touch with my family as most live away and actually see them as I talk to them!"

16% added having the costs of the device and Internet covered through GEO reduced their financial stress and allowed them to use their limited funds for other necessities.

"This has been a blessing. Saving money from paying for the Internet has helped me put money towards the unfair high rent we pay in Halifax. As a single parent, it's hard to make ends meet and this program has truly been a blessing for our family. Thank you GEO!"

14% said that having devices and the Internet brought them increased opportunities for learning, skill development, and completing online educational programs

"This is giving me the opportunity to do a lot of my training to hopefully get a job in the future as I am on assistance at this time. However this is giving me a chance to get online and have it more accessible to me. I have currently finished three different types of training certifications now with the use of having a laptop and the Internet."

"Because I have a device and Internet access, I've been able to explore research work opportunities that were previously out of reach. I can learn online courses and resources have enriched my learning journey, allowing me to acquire new skills and knowledge at my own pace."

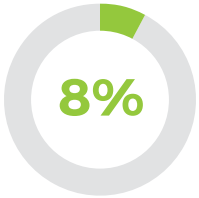
11% described how having devices and Internet access gave them the ability to search for jobs, work from home, and pursue training or skills development for employment

"I work from home, I have devices that connect to the Internet and I'm a single parent. The cost of the Internet is huge and having this option has been beyond appreciated and helpful!"

"Now that I have GEO Internet and a laptop I can job search more effectively than when I just was using my phone. Writing emails and filling out applications and forms is much easier. I can also play games on my laptop that I haven't enjoyed in years because I only had my phone."

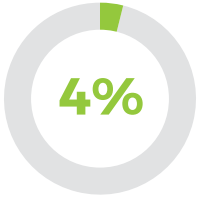
9% emphasized that having devices and Internet access gave them opportunities for self-improvement, increased confidence, better health management, and exploring personal interests.

"I have the ability to do research for bettering myself and to better be able to deal with things as I'm learning coping skills and watching motivational speakers and learn a lot about life, skills, and just everyday joy of having the opportunity to use the Internet anytime. I am very grateful for the opportunity, thank you."



8% added they appreciated the convenience of online banking and shopping.

"Being able to use online banking is so much more of a convenience than having to go to every place to pay bills."



4% highlighted how that they find the Internet helpful for accessing mental health resources, finding peer support, and managing mental health conditions.

"I have an uncommon and highly stigmatized mental health disorder. The Internet is necessary to find peer support."

"It has helped me with my sobriety journey as I do my meeting on Zoom. So thank you for that. It has helped me keep my family together and strong."

Referral Partners/Digital Champions (RPs/DCs) who responded to our survey (45 in total) listed the changes they perceived in their program participants as a result of having devices and Internet access. The RPs/DCs report more changes in most areas than individual Participants did. This is expected because RPs/DCs were often considering many participants across their programs, while individual Participants reflected only on their own personal experiences.

RPs/DCs said that people felt more empowered and independent. They also said that women and their children were safer from abusive partners, and could more easily access safety planning support because they have mobile phones.

In their open-ended comments, Referral Partners/ Digital Champions said that having devices and Internet access made Participants feel seen and empowered.

"Participants have told me that it shows people care about them, and understand the financial pressures people are facing. It is often disbelief that this help is available."

"I am happy to have this connection as I see the progress in students who could otherwise not be able to access education as easily. It also empowers the individual by having their own device and not borrowing someone else's."

89% They are less isolated

87% They are more connected with family and friends

80% They have accessed other government services or programs

78% They are participation in training and/or education

76% They pursue independent learning

76% They have accessed health/ mental health services

73% They access entertainment online (e.g., movies, games)

71% Their lifestyles have improved

67% They can stretch their budgets to cover other expenses

64% They can better meet the needs of their children

62% They are building job skills

60% They have fewer barriers (e.g., transportation, childcare) to participating in community programs

56% They do their banking online

47% They are more informed about their communities

31% They are more involved in strengthening their communities

27% They can maintain jobs

Impacts on Community Organizations

We asked Referral Partners/Digital Champions how their organizations are impacted by their involvement in the Digital Inclusion stone soup work. They rated the truthfulness of a number of impact statements (which we drew from their open-ended responses to this question in last year's evaluation).

The top impacts they identified (by saying they were somewhat or completely true) were that:

We are better equipped to serve our communities and reach our program participants more effectively (98%)

"Since being involved with GEO Nova Scotia, our organization has successfully addressed a more comprehensive range of individual needs affected by low literacy levels. For instance, participants in our digital skills program have used their skills to connect with family members several hundred kilometres away. Also, individual digital skills learners use their newly acquired skills to be more health and budget-conscious. Finally, most participants increased their independence in making everyday life choices because of digital skills. They have more accessibility to information, which improves their decision-making".

We can provide important services (e.g., education, health care) to many more people who need them (98%)

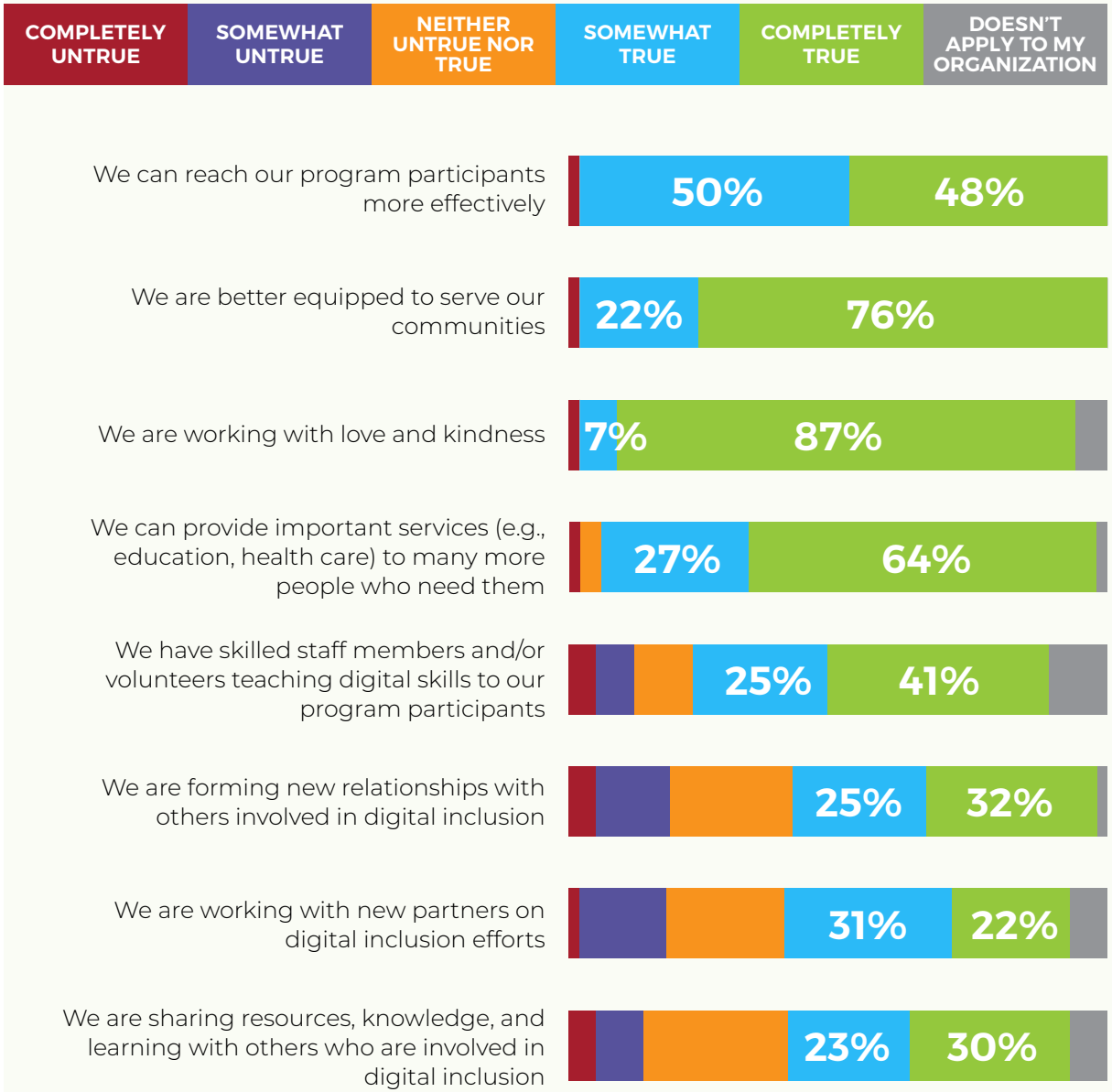
"Through our continued partnership with GEO NS, numerous learners have received Chromebooks/ headsets, and/or Internet to support their learning and more, while also receiving computer literacy support as needed. Teachers incorporate these devices into their lessons (in-class and online) and homework assignments to further students' digital competence. Digital progress was especially notable at the lowest literacy (Foundation) level, with extensive in-class instruction and modelling that transferred to independent use at home, including the ability to access an email link to Zoom. (This was a huge accomplishment as this "Literacy" group had little to no education in their home countries and were previously unfamiliar/uncomfortable with the use of a computer, email, etc.)"

We are working with love and kindness (94%)

"We are inspired by the love and kindness we feel working with GEO, and that has ripple effects in everything we do."

This table shows Referral Partners'/ Digital Champions' ratings of truthfulness on all of the impact statements.

Referral Partners/Digital Champions said that the biggest individual impact on their organizations from being involved in the Digital Inclusion stone soup work is that they are working with love and kindness (87% said that this was completely true).



Impacts on Business Partners

Working with GEO is **raising Business Partners' awareness of Digital Inclusion**, and **helping them understand how necessary it is for everyone to get online**.

"I never realized how much I take Internet access for granted until I saw the impact it has on people who don't have it."

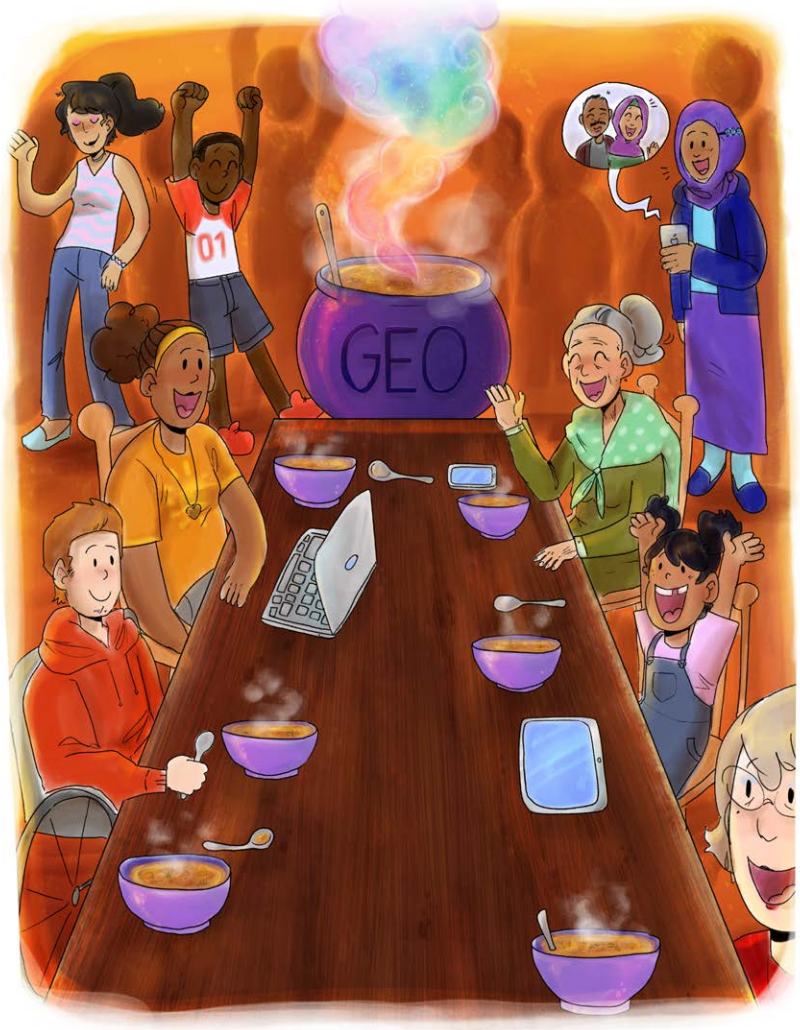
GEO Business Partners are inspired by the stone soup approach to Digital Inclusion. They are **realizing that by working together they are augmenting their impact on DIgital Inclusion**, which **makes them feel like they are part of something bigger**.

"Together, our contributions have really helped GEO extend their programs and change hundreds more lives."

Their businesses have **experienced unexpected benefits through this partnership**. Because monthly Internet accounts are being paid directly by GEO, they are **reconnecting with past customers** who previously could not afford to pay their bills. Their business's **reputations are being enhanced** because they are contributing to improving lives, and this is **drawing more customers**. Getting to know each other has led to them working in **new partnerships in other areas**.

Business Partners are learning from GEO's approach of working with love and kindness, and they are **adopting person-centred practices in their own businesses**.

"Working with GEO has been inspiring. Their person-centered approach has made us rethink some of our own practices."



Impacts on Government Partners

Government Partners of GEO Nova Scotia are embracing Digital Inclusion. They emphasize the value of delivering services and programs online - it means **they can reach and directly engage more people, more quickly, and more efficiently**.

"More pending applicants are moving through DCS's Employment Support program more quickly when it is offered online because more participants can go through the program at once, and barriers to participating are reduced (e.g., transportation, lap top, Internet, challenges leaving home, child care, mobility)."

Working on Digital Inclusion together facilitates **new partnerships that augment support to community members**.

"The SchoolsPlus Regional Advisory Committee is interested in GEO and thinks it would be helpful to them; this strengthens SchoolsPlus's relationships and facilitates new partnering. There is lots of demand, and other organizations can help those without children."

Government support workers can also **connect the people they are working with to resources, supports, and programs** they couldn't access otherwise. This **helps them achieve their mandates**.

"SchoolsPlus students and families who couldn't afford the Internet on their own are accessing mental health and counseling; participating in programs, meetings, and extracurricular activities; and staying in touch with friends and family."

Government Partners involved in Digital Inclusion are working more closely.

"Approaching things from a holistic perspective leads to better outcomes. Different departments are often working in isolation/siloes, more collaboration started during the pandemic, and we need to build on that more".

Please see the **Digital Solutions Story** for an example of how government Partners, community organizations, and individuals benefit from working together to provide government programs online.

PART 4 Stories

We're hearing many stories that help us understand how critical it is to get everyone online. Some of the stories are about new things the friends are trying together.

- **Digital Solutions Story**
- **GEO Mobile Story**
- **Additional Stories**

Digital Solutions Story

We draw on the story of **stone soup** *to illustrate Digital Inclusion work because it shows the power and beauty of everyone coming together, contributing what they can, and all being nourished by what we have created collectively.*

They had an idea …

One late summer afternoon in August of 2022, folks from GEO Nova Scotia and government (the Department of Community Services, or DCS) were gathered around the Digital Inclusion stone soup pot, getting hungry as they took turns stirring the soup and enjoying the delicious aromas. Some of the DCS folks were looking for new ways to think about providing programs, because they had 30,000 people to support and more than 300 waiting just to take part in their employment programs.

As they sipped their soup, the friends started talking together and came up with an idea. Now that GEO could make sure people had computers and the Internet, why not offer the employment preparation programs online? Surely they could invite more people to participate, and they could connect them more efficiently. People could join from home and they wouldn't need transportation, childcare, or special clothes.

In the autumn the friends invited a community impact organization called Solutions Learning to join the conversation and share their expertise about helping people learn life skills and prepare for employment. They all decided that they would try something new together, and they would call it Digital Solutions.

They started to get very excited about all the possibilities, and before they knew it, everyone was talking at once. Then someone said "Wait a minute, let's all take a deep breath. This is very exciting, and we want to get it right, so why don't we **start small and build from there**'? They smiled and nodded in agreement, knowing how important it was to **learn what to adapt and how to improve when they tried new things**.

They rolled up their sleeves and got to work on their plan together in December. They decided they would focus on three things: 1) building strong relationships among everyone involved in organizing the program 2) empowering participants to ask for the help they needed, and 3) helping more people prepare for employment by making the program accessible and spreading resources a long way to reach more people.

AMHERST - THE FIRST PILOT

They decided to try Digital Solutions in Amherst first. Over the holidays and into the new year, DCS workers invited people to take part in the first DIgital Solutions program, and 28 people signed up.

“Wow,” said the friend from DCS “we’ve never had so many people sign up for a work program - usually there are 4 or 5. We never could have done this alone”.

DCS workers in Halifax and Amherst talked a lot when they were getting everything ready. Many of them were meeting each other for the first time. **They worked well together and really liked each other; they discovered that they were looking forward to working together more in the future, on this program and even on other programs**.

They had to contact Participants, figure out what they needed, arrange to deliver computers and set up Internet accounts, make the program virtual, and introduce the participants to each other and tell them what to expect, all in time for the program to begin in the middle of February 2023. This was a lot to do in a short time, especially when they were doing it for the first time. There were no instructions to follow - which gave them a lot of freedom to figure out what would work for them - and also led to some head-scratching and trying to figure things out in a hurry. People even got locked out of offices once when they came for in-person meetings because there was a bit of confusion about what was going on. They kept their spirits up and treated each other with love and kindness, and they managed to pull it off with a lot of communication and by remembering that they were there to help improve people’s lives.

LEGEND:

CONTRIBUTIONS

LEARNINGS

OUTCOMES: DIRECT RESULTS OF THE PROGRAM

IMPACTS: LONG-TERM SHIFTS

Going through this experience together made the friends closer. **They genuinely trusted and cared about each other, and they wanted to contribute their best so the program would succeed and help participants improve their lives. They were flexible and open to doing things differently and found new ways to solve problems and make things work**.

The program ran for a month and it did go well. **Program leaders made the space safe and welcoming, and they were loving and kind**. They helped Participants learn how to use computers and the Internet. They taught them about all the skills they have to offer in workplaces, how to look for and apply for jobs, and about doing good interviews. The program leaders also helped the Participants learn about life skills like setting goals, good communication, being confident, having a positive attitude, managing time, understanding finances, managing stress, and dealing with difficult situations.

Participants enjoyed connecting with each other, they **were eager to learn**, and they **shared wisdom they had gained from their life experiences**. They were **honest and kind and they supported each other. They showed up and did the homework and participated fully**. A leader from DCS joined the group online one day to say hello, and was so moved by them that she ended up falling in love with the Participants.

Because learning was so important to the friends, **they took time to reflect together, reflect with Participants, celebrate successes, and pay attention to how they could do better next time**.

DIGBY & GRANVILLE

LEGEND:

CONTRIBUTIONS

LEARNINGS

OUTCOMES: DIRECT RESULTS OF THE PROGRAM

IMPACTS: LONG-TERM SHIFTS

After the first *Digital Solutions* pilot in Amherst, GEO and friends thought there was a lot of potential to achieve their goal of enrolling a lot of people in the program in a short time and using resources efficiently. The Digital Inclusion stone soup was really cooking now! They decided to offer the program in the Digby and Granville areas next. **They thought carefully about what they learned in Amherst, and they made improvements to their process**. The friends were better prepared and did not have to scramble so much this time. There were 22 Participants in the program, and not as many Internet accounts for GEO to set up, mostly because the Internet wasn't available in some areas in that part of the province. Internet service is a vital ingredient in Digital Inclusion stone soup, and **GEO is continuing to work with friends to figure out how to get people connected wherever they live**.

CAPE BRETON

In early fall, the friends were standing together getting warm around the fire and enjoying hot bowls of delicious soup, something they did often now. They decided to offer the next pilot in Cape Breton. They wanted to learn about what worked in all different parts of the province. **The friends were getting used to working together, and they all knew what they needed to do, so there were even fewer glitches to work out this time**. And 33 people signed up. GEO made a mistake ordering equipment, which meant delivering headsets directly to Participants - and thinking ahead about **ordering in bulk next time**. After the program was over the participants wanted to stay connected, and they **formed their own support group**.

CENTRAL REGION

The next challenge was to offer Digital Solutions to 105 Participants in the region. They assigned people to two groups, each meeting twice a week for four weeks. At first GEO was providing refurbished laptops for Participants, and **now that so many people are participating and they need so many computers, friends who supply the equipment can offer GEO a better price**, and **everyone is getting brand new laptops with Windows licenses, headsets, and 3-year warranties**.

BUILDING ON SUCCESS ...

LEGEND:

CONTRIBUTIONS

LEARNINGS

OUTCOMES: DIRECT RESULTS OF THE PROGRAM

IMPACTS: LONG-TERM SHIFTS

After each Digital Solutions pilot, the friends get together over a bowl of delicious soup (that seems to be getting more delicious nourishing all the time) and reflect together about what they are learning. This time they focused on what was making the program successful.

They could feel in their hearts that the **relationships they had built were getting stronger** all the time. They felt a **warm connection and comfort with each other**, and they **trusted each other**. They **knew they needed each other, and that none of them could do this alone**. They **had the feeling they could reach out to each other whenever they needed to**, about *Digital Solutions* or anything else. They knew **these relationships were key to their successes and would be helpful with other shared efforts** too.

The friends found that **working together with open minds and flexibility created a shared willingness to try new things**. They loved that **they were all learning together, and no one had to pretend they knew all the answers**. Remembering the big picture and thinking about making people's lives better helped the friends communicate well, solve problems, and celebrate successes. It also helped the friends **support each other if they had to switch gears and do things differently when something unexpected came up**.

The friends thought about what they heard from Participants. They realized that the **computers and Internet access are big motivators for Participants**. Being able to **keep them after the program** means that **people can access health services, join support groups, take part in other programs, continue to learn, pursue interests, stay in touch with family and friends (and each other), and work from home. Being able to join the program from home means people save money on transportation and childcare**, and **more of them are staying with the program to the end**.

Each group of Participants added something special to the soup, and they were happy to tell the friends the many ways Digital Solutions nourished them. For example, Participants have **learned how to do things online safely** (such as Christmas shopping from a small rural community), **they know how to access helpful resources** (like 211, and tenancy rules to help solve a problem with a property owner), and **they know how to prepare strong job applications**. They also feel **more comfortable reaching out to caseworkers for help preparing for interviews**.

Many participants said they have **gained confidence in themselves**; they have **learned to be less afraid of meeting new people**; they are now **more comfortable speaking in groups**; and they are getting better about **not giving up when things are difficult**.

WHAT'S NEXT… ?

Things had gone really well. The Department's Minister even said **this work was "breathing new life into DCS employment offices"**. When they started hearing about all of the successes Participants were experiencing in these pilots, DCS workers got very excited and wanted to know more.

LEGEND:

CONTRIBUTIONS

LEARNINGS

OUTCOMES: DIRECT RESULTS OF THE PROGRAM

IMPACTS: LONG-TERM SHIFTS

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

What part of this story stands out to you? Why?

Is there anything else you've learned that we can apply to the Digital Solutions work?

What can you take from this story that would be helpful for your work?

Share your reflections here.

GEO Mobile Story

*We draw on the story of **stone soup** to illustrate Digital Inclusion work because it shows the power and beauty of everyone coming together, contributing what they can, and all being nourished by what we have created collectively.*

The friends were pleased with their progress making Digital Inclusion stone soup together. Working closely for some time, they had managed to get devices (ChromeBooks, laptops, iPads and headsets) and Internet access to more than 2,000 people across Nova Scotia. And they knew there were many people they hadn't reached yet.

One cold winter day, a couple of the friends from **GEO Nova Scotia** and **Eastlink** were warming themselves around the soup pot, and they started talking about how important smartphones were becoming for everyday life. Even people who already had devices and Internet access needed phones for things like Two Factor Authentication, a way of confirming someone's identity and keeping them secure when they are online.

Nearby some government folks from the **NS Advisory Council on the Status of Women** (Status of Women) were working on new ways of helping women who experience gender-based violence (GBV). They heard about the Digital Inclusion stone soup work from one of GEO's friends, and they were very interested in how smartphones could help the women they knew.

So the mutual friend introduced the Status of Women folks and the GEO folks. They got together to think about whether they could add smartphones as an ingredient to the stone soup, and how they could make sure women

experiencing violence could safely access the phones. They knew the **Transition House Association of Nova Scotia (THANS)** member organizations were connected with women experiencing gender-based violence, and had expertise in how to work with them respectfully. So they got together for a bowl of soup and brainstormed about how they could make it all work. It looked promising, and the folks at THANS were excited because they knew just how much phones could help women.

THANS told the rest of the friends that a woman is murdered by her intimate partner every six days in Canada, and in the past 10 years, over 35 of these women were Nova Scotian. They explained that in 2021, over 4,000 women and children needed to rely on the transition services at one of the 12 homes run by THANS.

"Picture this," they continued, *"You've escaped an abusive partner. They've controlled every aspect of your life, from your finances to your relationships with friends and family. They even manage your phone plan as another way they can control you. Even if you could have taken your phone with you, there are risks. It's traceable. They'll find you. They'll call you. They'll cut it off. You want to call your people - your family and your friends. You have no way to reach them or for them to reach you. You need to access services and programs to help you through this transition. A new phone would be a lifeline, but you don't have the money. Instead, you're isolated and you don't know where to turn".*

"Imagine instead, arriving at a transition house, where you feel welcome and safe, where people make sure you and your children have what you need to begin to heal. Not only that, they tell you about a new program that will provide you with a free smartphone and a 12-month mobile plan to help you get back on your feet. You are so relieved. Now you can make the connections you need to build a new life".

All of the friends were really committed to making this work, and to making things right for women experiencing violence. GEO and Eastlink met to explore options for billing and services to go with the phones. GEO applied for some funding from River Philip Foundation to help cover the costs of the phones, although the application wasn't funded this time. Eastlink offered GEO a generous mobile plan at a special low rate as part of their contribution to Digital Inclusion stone soup.

It was summer now and the soup was simmering away gently. The friends were getting pretty excited - it looked like their plan was coming together, and they knew how important it was. GEO told friends at the Status of Women about the phone plan with Eastlink, and Status of Women confirmed funding to support what the friends were starting to refer to as 'GEO Mobile'. Then Eastlink offered to contribute some like-new phones, and friends at the **YWCA** agreed to distribute the phones with plans through GEO to women experiencing violence who they support.

Around that time GEO met a new friend at **Orchard**, who sells like-new refurbished phones and devices. GEO asked whether Orchard would like to contribute to the Digital Inclusion stone soup and Orchard said yes, they could offer GEO special rates for iPhone and Samsung smartphones, and help distribute them to partners across the province.

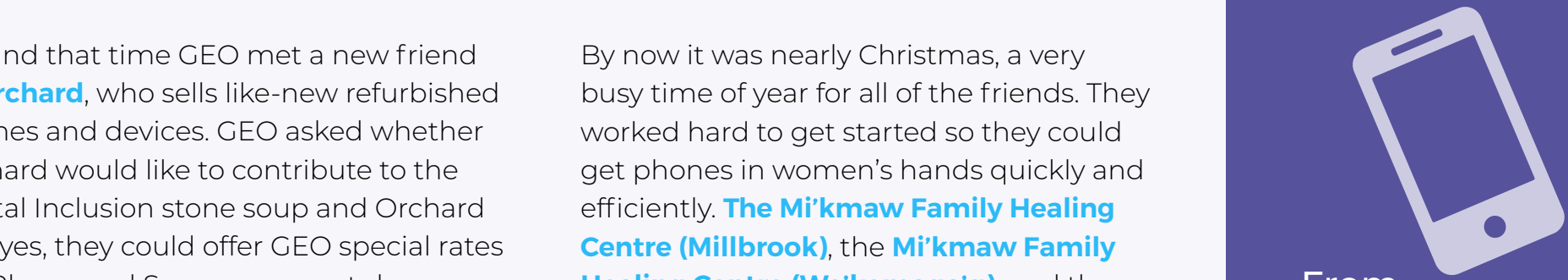
Seeing everything coming together, and believing that GEO would treat women with love and kindness, THANS agreed to join the friends in their GEO Mobile efforts. They helped GEO sort out the details of how everything would work. **Byrony House**, **Third Place Transition House**, **Chrysalis House**, and the **Naomi Society** became GEO Referral Partners. This meant they could access smartphones as well as computers for the women they support. The friends thought carefully about the safety of the women, and GEO intentionally assigned staff members who could build trust and respect with women who had very good reasons not to trust people.

By now it was nearly Christmas, a very busy time of year for all of the friends. They worked hard to get started so they could get phones in women's hands quickly and efficiently. **The Mi'kmaw Family Healing Centre (Millbrook)**, the **Mi'kmaw Family Healing Centre (We'komaqa'q)**, and the **Cape Breton Transition House** became Referral Partners with GEO. Orchard delivered the phones directly to THANS members, who could choose the variety and quantity of phones they needed for women. The first phone was activated before Christmas.

Between January and May, **Leeside Transition House**, **Tearmann Society for Abused Women**, **Harbour House** and **YWCA Waverly Inn** became GEO Referral Partners.

GEO and friends always want to learn and improve, and so in the early spring they got together to reflect on their work together so far.

They started by thinking about what they were learning about how women were using their phones, and how having phones impacted them.



From December to the end of May, through GEO, THANS members and the YWCA distributed a total of **190 smartphones** to women experiencing gender-based violence (124 in rural areas and 66 in urban areas).

"Access to a mobile device is often a lifeline for women experiencing gender-based violence, especially in rural communities" said one of the friends.

"And for their children as well," added a friend from one of the transition houses. *"A lot of our women have children of cell-phone age, and the moms give their children the cell phones to take to school. After all, the children are leaving their communities, their schools, their bus routes. Their moms need to know they are safe and secure. Moms don't want their children to be stigmatized for not having phones either".*

"Yes," added another transition house worker. *"One of the women we work with uses her phone to text her family and our shelter for support while she receives treatment for a life-threatening illness. Having a phone allows her to make medical appointments and feel safe in her home".*

Another worker from a transition house echoed this point. *"We work with a woman who uses her phone to make appointments for her baby's visits to the doctor. She also uses it to call us for support, and the data she gets with it has changed her life. As a young mom with a child, her budget is very low, and this helps her afford formula and diapers".*

"One of the women at our shelter was able to get a job with the help of her phone. It meant she could get calls for interviews, and now she can be called for last minute shifts so she can make more money to support herself. As a woman who comes from a domestic violence situation, the telephone also gives her feelings of confidence and safety when she is working in the community".

"The Chromebooks available through GEO are also really helpful," added another transition house worker, *"especially for newcomers who have a lot of paperwork to file for MSI cards etc and whose partners may have taken all the electronics. WIth a Chromebook they can do all this online, they don't have to go to the library. That saves on transportation costs and time, and the women can keep their children safe at the shelter. It also enables women to be independent when it comes to doing banking and such".*

"Having Internet access for a year makes a huge difference for families that have just moved out," said another transition house worker. *"It helps women use the resources they have for rent and groceries. They can also stay in touch with their families back home".*

A staff member at GEO shared some of the messages she received from women once they had their phones. "Many express thanks," she said. "One woman said she was very pleased with her phone. She said,

"It has helped me so much. I was lost, and I was in situations where I had to call 911 and I didn't have a working phone. Thank you so much from the bottom of my heart. I can keep appointments now. I'm going back to school."

"One woman texted me looking for help setting up WhatsApp on her phone so she could keep in touch with her family in Africa" said the GEO worker. *"And another expressed her thanks for the phone, saying that she appreciates having a stable and reliable phone number and phone. She told me it's an incredible asset for resumes and school applications".*

"And here's a message I got that shows the ripple effects of making things right," the GEO worker added.

"Hi there I just wanted to start out by expressing how very grateful I am for all that you have done for me. I know you don't know me or my situation but this is life-changing for me right now and I don't know how I will ever pay it forward. But when I'm back on my feet I will be definitely trying to help somebody in a situation like mine. Thank you again".

The friends listened carefully to all of these stories, and they really felt the difference phones were making in the lives of women experiencing gender-based violence. They knew it was important that they were all working together to get women online.

"Some of the things we are doing well;" they agreed. *"We are building relationships, thinking outside the box, contributing what we can to the Digital Inclusion stone soup, working flexibly and adapting quickly, listening respectfully to each other, and carefully considering people's lived experiences".*

"There is no limit to what we can do if we have the right mindset and the right partners" said one of the friends. *"Yes,"* added another friend, *"People can work together to make a difference in people's lives when it's needed. And imagine how out-of-the-box solutions can help others who are homeless and face other issues that would stop them from being connected".*

"How do we address the challenges and expand this model to others facing barriers to connection to get everyone online?" they asked themselves.

"It's important for us to have complete information about the distribution of the mobiles so we can provide support to individual women when it's needed. We are always learning and we will continue to work with our partners to improve the data collection process" said a GEO friend.

They agreed that they wanted to keep this program as low-barrier as possible, both for Referral Partners and for Participants. They knew that lack of Internet availability in some parts of the province was a big barrier, and they started thinking about new partners who might help them find creative solutions.

"We have some experience with this," said a GEO friend. *"We know that starting small and learning how to do the work well is very important, and we have to be intentional and thoughtful as the program expands".*

"While there is room to refine this program," said one of the friends, "it feels like ***a model is emerging here that could be applied more broadly***".

"GEO Mobile has become a formal program and we will soon be offering mobile phones as a device option to all GEO Participants" a friend from GEO shared. "This project has taught us how important it is to offer mobiles".

PROJECT NUMBERS AT A GLANCE

ORGANIZATION	LOCATION	RURAL/URBAN	# OF PARTICIPANTS TO WHOM MOBILES WERE DISTRIBUTED
Autumn House	Amherst	Rural	18
Bryony House	Dartmouth	Urban	17
Cape Breton Transition House	Sydney	Urban	21
Chrysalis House	Kentville	Rural	1
Harbour House	Bridgewater	Rural	11
Juniper House	Yarmouth	Rural	12
Leeside Society	Port Hawkesbury	Rural	12
Mi'kmaw Family Healing Centres	Millbrook First Nation	Rural	13
Mi'kmaw Family Healing Centres	We'koqma'q First Nation	Rural	16
Naomi Society	Antigonish	Rural	21
Tearmann Society	New Glasgow	Rural	10
Third Place Transition House	Truro	Rural	7
YWCA	Halifax	Urban	28
Total		**124 Rural 66 Urban**	**190**

CRITICAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS

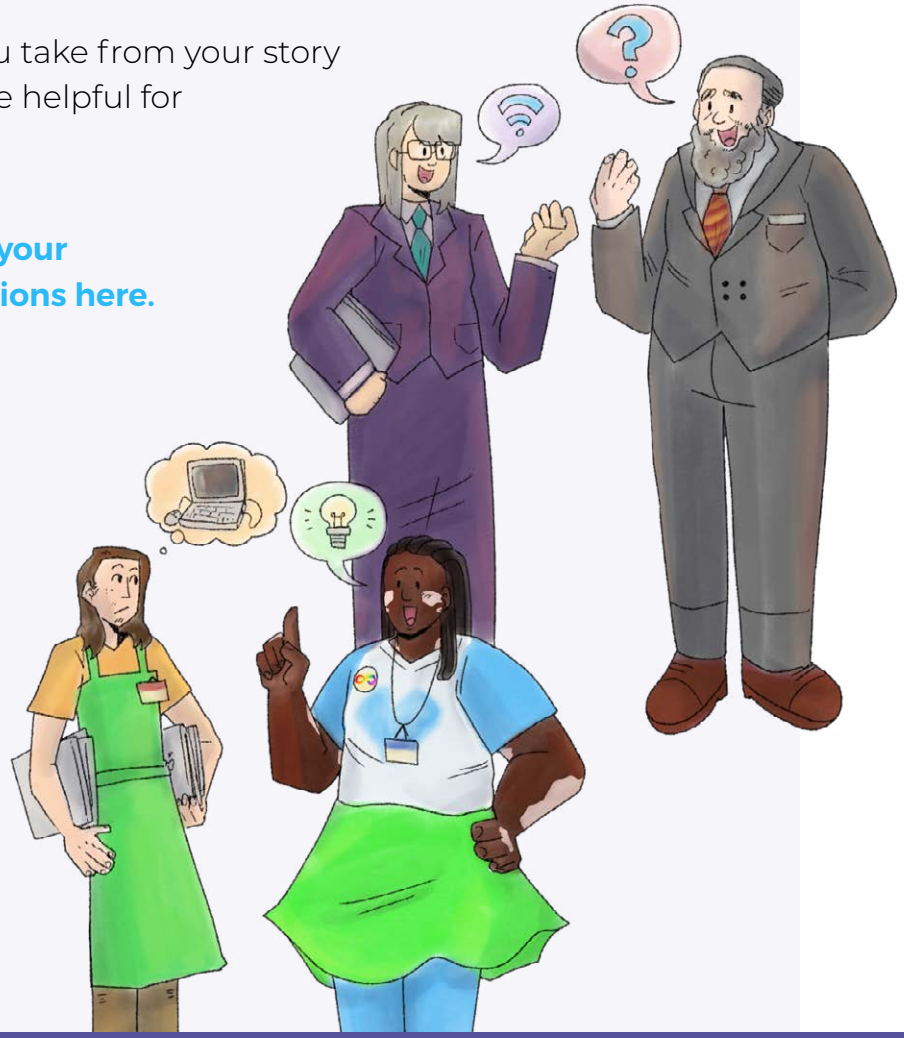
What parts of this story stand out for you? Why?

How would you describe the model of working together that is emerging here? What are the components of the model?

Do you have any wisdom to share that we can apply to GEO Mobile?

What can you take from your story that would be helpful for your work?

Share your reflections here.



Additional Stories

MORE STORIES ABOUT DIGITAL INCLUSION

We are always adding to our story collection!

Please click here to see more stories about Digital Inclusion.

PART 5 Infrastructure, Strengths & Challenges

GEO is always thinking about how to build a strong place to cook the Digital Inclusion stone soup.

- **GEO's Infrastructure**
- **Strengths of our Digital Inclusion Work**
- **Challenges of our Digital Inclusion Work**

GEO's Infrastructure

GEO Nova Scotia officially became a not-for-profit organization on March 22, 2022. Since then, while concentrating on getting everyone online, the Board and Management Team have also been building a strong foundation for GEO the organization, to support Digital Inclusion work in Nova Scotia.

This assessment describes GEO's progress in three areas: 1) operational infrastructure, 2) managerial infrastructure, and 3) support infrastructure. It provides an overall rating for each area and sub-area (Poor, Fair, Good, or Very Good), and identifies potential vulnerabilities.

1. OPERATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE (OVERALL STATUS: GOOD+)

A. Facilities and Equipment: Assessment of office space, hardware, and other physical resources. **(Status: Good)**

- GEO has an affordable office in an accessible location that provides meeting and work spaces, as well as a secure location for device storage and pick up.
- GEO has a warehousing agreement with IMP Solutions and DataGuide Technologies for device storage.

Potential Vulnerability: Ongoing issues with the building owner failing to complete necessary repairs to the heating system could mean relocating the office before winter.

B. Technology Systems: Assessment of IT systems, software for communication and data management, and cybersecurity measures. **(Status: Very Good)**

- All staff have appropriate and current hardware and software needed to carry out their work:
  - Staff each have laptops, dual monitors, and headsets.
  - The office is equipped with two Owls and a wall-mounted screen to support hybrid meetings.

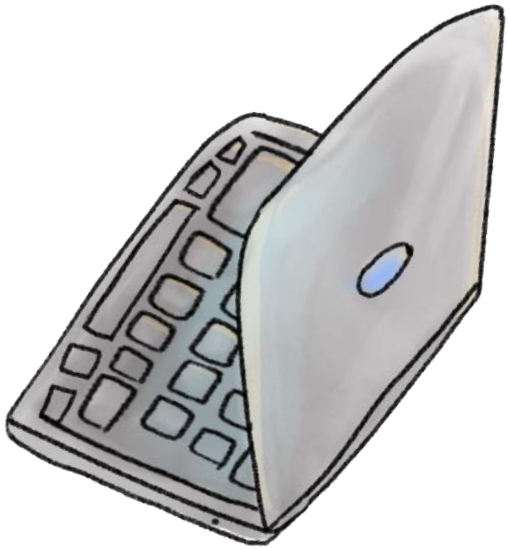
- Excellent and timely IT support is provided through DataGuide Technologies.
- Software and IT systems currently used in daily operations:
    - Salesforce (contacts, intake data)
    - Google Enterprise: email, video meetings, storage, calendar
    - SPSS (data analysis)
    - Collage HRIS (human resources management)
    - Otter (meeting notes, data collection)
- GEO has a reliable data backup and cybersecurity plan in place through DataGuide Technologies.
- GEO has confirmed that the cybersecurity practices of partners who could hold sensitive information on its behalf (e.g., Maritime Design (website) and Salesforce (program data) are compliant with GEO's policies.
- GEO is working with DataGuide Technologies toward establishing a cyber warranty.
- GEO is planning a mock disaster exercise to ensure that the system designed is effective and that staff know how to handle a cybersecurity emergency.
- GEO has a robust set of IT policies.

C. Human Resources: Review of staffing levels, volunteer engagement, and training programs. **(Status: Good)**

- The GEO Team is composed of 15 positions; 11 are full-time employees and four are part-time contracted (fractional) consultants (Evaluation & Learning, Finance, Human Resources, and Communications).
- As the work is growing, there is some concern that key operational roles don't have sufficient time to complete required tasks.
- GEO is using Collage, a robust and efficient Human Resources Information System that holds and integrates comprehensive HR information. It can be integrated with payroll systems, and is easily scalable.
- The GEO Employee Handbook content is reflected in the processes built into Collage. It provides clear guidance for recruiting and hiring staff; provides a code of conduct for staff; explains workplace schedules, benefits and time off; and outlines performance management, health and safety, and administrative standards.
- Regular team meetings and reflection sessions provide brief opportunities for team members to think and learn together. These meetings occur four times per week and allow the team to address relevant topics in a timely manner.
- A formal perormance management process has been developed.

Potential Vulnerability: Four of the five Operations Team members are part-time contractors who need other work/clients to fill their work schedule. If any of the fractional team members were to leave for other contracts, GEO could lose a great deal of organizational knowledge and experience. This may also limit how much additional work each individual is capable of taking on for GEO due to other commitments.

Potential Vulnerability: GEO does not currently have an established training program for staff development. The nature of GEO's work requires that team members maintain up-to-date technology skills and have strong interpersonal skills to work respectfully and knowledgeably with people in many diverse communities who face difficult challenges. Staff retention and scaling may become more difficult without training goals and professional development processes to support them.



2. MANAGERIAL INFRASTRUCTURE (OVERALL STATUS: GOOD)

A. Governance: Analysis of Board composition, bylaws, and governance policies. **(Status: Fair)**

- There are currently five members on the GEO Nova Scotia Board of Directors.
- Board members have a lot of expertise and guidance to offer, and a lot of demands on their time, and GEO is a young organization that needs a lot of attention. While the Board is striving to move toward governance, GEO's nature as a start-up organization means that many of its operational decisions have strategic implications, and therefore involve the Board. It can be challenging at times to juggle GEO's needs and the time Board members have available.
- As a new organization, GEO requires that Board members keep a close eye on the work to ensure it is aligned with the organization's Strategic Plan, and to support the Executive Director in building a strong organizational foundation. WIth time, as GEO matures, Board members anticipate stepping back into a governance and policy role.
- A recruitment process is underway with the intention of expanding the Board to eight or more members, and increasing the diversity of the Board.
- Policy development is ongoing in several areas of the organization, and draft policies are regularly sent to the Board for discussion and approval.

- The Board has established HR and Finance subcommittees, which meet regularly and move the work along efficiently.
- The roles and responsibilities of the Board are clearly defined and communicated.
- Subcommittees are taking on more work between regular board meetings in order to maximize the efficiency of board meetings. As that transition takes place, the Board can sometimes be drawn into revisiting and repeating discussions held at the Committee level, which may unnecessarily draw out the approval process.

Potential Vulnerability: With the large number of items requiring Board members' time and attention, policy review and approval is sometimes delayed. This can have a ripple effect of stalling work in certain operational areas.

B. Strategic Planning: Evaluation of mission statement clarity, strategic goals, and planning processes. **(Status: Good)**

- GEO has a very clear mission statement and strategic objectives aligned with its goals.
- GEO's Strategic Plan was developed a year ago (when GEO was one year old), and is currently being revisited and updated to ensure it is proactive and serves the upcoming growth and scaling phase GEO is anticipating.
- The Operational Plan serves as a touchstone for the Management Team, and is reviewed monthly to ensure alignment with the Strategic Plan.

Potential Vulnerability: Opportunities for GEO to expand into new areas of work arise frequently. These opportunities may not always align with the Strategic Plan, and there is a risk that too many new initiatives at the same time may over-extend the organization's capacity.

C. Financial Management: Review of budgeting, accounting systems, and financial sustainability measures. **(Status: Very Good)**

- GEO has an annual budgeting process in place.
- Financial reports are prepared and reviewed by the Executive Director, Finance Lead, and Treasurer monthly.
- Financial reports are presented at monthly Board meetings (this is a standing agenda item).
- GEO updated the dates of regular Board meetings to align with the financial cycle and ensure that Board members have the most current financial information available at every meeting.
- GEO has created a Purchase Order system.
- Several financial policies have been approved by the Board; and additional policies are in the late stages of development and approval.

Potential Vulnerability: If GEO successfully increases its funding sources, monitoring and reporting requirements could place a strain on the financial management of the organization, and existing systems may need to be enhanced.

3. SUPPORT INFRASTRUCTURE (OVERALL STATUS: GOOD)

A. Revenue Generation/Development Capabilities: Overview of fundraising strategies, donor management, and grant acquisition. **(Status: Fair)**

- GEO is primarily funded by the provincial government on an annual basis.
- Nearly all of the funding comes from one department, Community Services.
- The Board and the Executive Director are engaged in cultivating strategic and genuine relationships within government.
- Discussions about potential collaborations are currently underway with several departments such as Labour Skills and Immigration, Education and Early Childhood Development, Seniors and Long Term Care, and Cyber-Security and Digital Solutions. Some government staff are actively engaged in GEO's ongoing work (e.g., as Referral Partners, as members of GEO's Insight Team).
- GEO is considering the merits of applying for Charitable Tax Status.
- GEO's private sector partners contribute in-kind resources by offering significantly reduced (or waived) costs for goods and services. In 2023-24 the monetary value of these contributions is estimated at over $500K.
- Private sector partners are genuinely thrilled to be working collectively to improve Digital Inclusion and serve a higher purpose.

Potential Vulnerability: Over 90% of GEO's funding has been year-to-year from a single government department, which may not be sustainable for GEO's long-term viability.

B. Compliance and Risk Management: Checks for legal compliances, insurance, and risk management policies **(Status: Good)**

- GEO is compliant with all relevant legal and regulatory requirements with the NS Registry of Joint Stocks and CRA.
- Terms of reference for GEO's Finance and Risk Committee are in the late stages of development and approval. This Committee will take overall responsibility for GEO's finances, including planning, budgeting, risk management, internal controls, and oversight and reporting of financial matters.
- The policies in GEO's Employee Handbook meet or exceed NS Labour Standards legislation requirements.
- GEO adopted its 2022-23 Auditor recommendations for inventory control processes.
- All staff members are required to complete Vulnerable Sector Checks and Criminal Records Checks on hiring.
- GEO has General Liability Insurance, Officers & Directors Insurance, and is in the late stages of acquiring Cyber Insurance and a Cyber Warranty.

Potential Vulnerability: As programs increase in volume and complexity, additional resources and attention may be needed to successfully manage financial and regulatory processes.

C. Communication: Assessment of internal and external communication channels and public relations efforts. **(Status: Good)**

- Internal communication among staff takes place through all staff morning check-ins three days per week, a Friday reflection session, and a weekly social hour.
- Staff members have weekly 1:1 check-ins with their supervisors.
- Informal communications among staff happen through email, a team chat, and in the process of working together on tasks.
- The full team gathers twice yearly for a two-day in-person retreat.
- GEO is in the late stages of development of a comprehensive Communications Plan.
- GEO's Communications Lead and the Executive Director (with support from the Board) manage the organization's external communications and public relations.
- All external communications must be approved by the Executive Director.

Strengths of our Digital Inclusion Work

People love stories. They are magical. Like a steaming bowl of hot soup, they warm your belly and make you feel good. Telling stories builds friendships and communities, and people start to imagine what's possible together.

When people hear the story of stone soup, they immediately get it. They don't necessarily know that the approach parallels the conceptual framework called *Collective Impact*. But right away they understand that everyone has something to contribute and that everyone benefits. **Leveraging the stone soup story is a significant strength of the Digital Inclusion work in Nova Scotia**. People see that they have a place in the work, and they know we are all in it together. They also understand that we can make something together that none of us could make alone. Something better, something tastier, something more nourishing.

Drawing on the stone soup story has helped bring a **broad and diverse network of people and partners to the work**, which is another strength. Now community members, community organizations, businesses, and government are all contributing their own unique flavourings and experiences to the Digital Inclusion soup pot, enhancing the collective work. One of the absolutely essential ingredients making this work possible (and there are others) is the knowledge and relationships that Referral Partners hold with community members. Their knowledge about the communities and the trust they have with community members opens the door to people accepting devices and Internet connections, and lends credibility to GEO to then build its own caring relationships with community members.

Another important strength of this work is the **infrastructure** that supports it. GEO offers a container to hold the soup. Over the last two years, while concentrating on getting everyone online, the Board and Management Team have also been building a strong foundation for GEO to support Digital Inclusion work in Nova Scotia. Folks in government are listening to what GEO is saying, and they value GEO's leadership in this work.

The GEO Team is now 15 people strong, and includes six Digital Inclusion Facilitators, whose focus is on working with Referral Partners and Participants to distribute devices and Internet connections. They also deliver the GEO Digital Champions programs to partners, supported by the Digital Champions Lead, to help build people's skills and confidence to be online safely.

The folks involved in making the soup tell us that **more people are recognizing the importance of Digital Inclusion across Nova Scotia**, and they say that **GEO plays a key role in driving this conversation**. They **appreciate government thinking and understanding more about Digital Inclusion**, and working with others to improve it.

"[A strength is the] awareness that GEO has brought to Digital Inclusion - there is a higher level of awareness in Nova Scotia than in other provinces..."

Many of the folks stirring the soup pot say that they are more aware, and can **better appreciate how difficult life must be for people who don't have access to the Internet**, and that without the Internet, people are excluded from almost everything. Having that understanding makes them want to work harder to get everyone online.

"I take Internet/mobility for granted every day; now I can see how difficult it would be for people who don't have access."

"People understand that being online is no longer an 'extra' or a privilege but a necessity for medical appointments, support groups, government services, etc."

Challenges of our Digital Inclusion Work

The stone soup story, with its emphasis on collaboration and shared contributions, is a delicious and nourishing metaphor that illustrates the collective effort required to ensure that everyone has a place at the digital table in Nova Scotia. And the most delicious soups needs a flavourful broth to bind the ingredients together. In the case of Digital Inclusion, that essential broth is Internet connectivity.

However, much like a soup missing a key ingredient, **some rural areas in Nova Scotia still do not have access to the broadband Internet needed** for full participation in the digital world. Limited Internet availability creates significant barriers for individuals and communities alike.

This lack of connectivity not only hinders access to educational resources and employment opportunities, but also makes it difficult for people to access essential services such as healthcare and government support, widening the gap between those with and without access.

While improving infrastructure is not GEO's primary focus, achieving universal rural connectivity is essential to ensure that the benefits of digital inclusion reach everyone, regardless of where they live.

But connectivity is just one ingredient in the complex broth of Digital Inclusion. **Affordability remains a major concern, especially as the cost-of-living crisis continues to grow**. The cost of devices and Internet service can be prohibitive for many, particularly people with low incomes. While GEO and friends work to leverage resources and explore creative solutions, sustainable funding that matches the need remains as a challenge.

GEO, government partners, communities, community members, and businesses all want to get everyone online as soon as possible. Everyone seems to agree there is incredible potential for GEO's work to expand. And there is a **tension between responding quickly and responding well**. It will be important to scale intentionally and carefully to ensure once people get online they can stay online. The soup needs time to simmer so it doesn't boil over.

PART 6 Evaluation & Learning

The friends always want to learn, so we can make the best Digital Inclusion stone soup ever.

- **Our Evaluation Process**
- **Evaluation Questions**
- **Reflections on the Theme: Are we Transforming Systems?**

Our Evaluation Process

DATE	DATA COLLECTION METHOD	GROUP OR DATA SOURCE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
February 27 - April 23	Storytelling	Digital Solutions Partners	3 Organizations
April 5-29	Survey	Participants	365
April 8-26	Survey	Referral Partners & Digital Champions	45
April 8-17	Storytelling	GEO Mobile Partners	5 Organizations
April 16	Focus Group	Insight Team	6
April 18-25	Database analysis	GEO Salesforce Data	N/A
April 25	Survey & Group Conversation	Board of Directors & Operations Team	10
April 25-30	Survey	GEO Team Members	14
April 30	Focus Group	Government Partners	3 Departments
April 30-May 17	Assessment of organizational infrastructure (interviews and conversations)	Management Team	5
May 1	Focus Group & Conversations	Supplier/Business Partners	7
May 15, 16, 21	Data Parties/ Sensemaking Sessions (online & in-person)	All	41

Evaluation Questions

QUESTIONS ASKED OF DIGITAL INCLUSION GROUPS	Participants	RPs & DCs	Insight Team	Board	GEO Team	Government Partners	Business Partners
How does having a device and Internet access impact your life?	Y						
Is having a device and Internet access helpful to your family or the people you live with?	Y						
How are you learning about using a computer and the Internet?	Y						
Do you need any other supports for getting online?	Y						
Fit of devices, computer/Internet skills/confidence?	Y						
Have you noticed any changes in the way these groups are interacting with each other? What would help them improve their work?	Y						
What has changed for your program participants because they have devices and Internet access?		Y					
Is there anything that would be helpful to your organization in terms of getting participants online?		Y					
Is your organization experiencing any barriers in relation to Digital Champions?		Y					
What are the impacts of staff and/or volunteers at your organization completing DC training?		Y					
What DC training session content would be useful to you/your organization?	Y	Y					
Is your organization interested in getting together periodically with other GEO RPs for knowledge exchange about getting people online?		Y					
Ideas for the upcoming DI conference?		Y					
What has changed for you since GEO was formed and we started making this digital inclusion stone soup (working on digital inclusion) together? Please share examples?		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Are there ripple effects spreading from this work to our shared work/other areas of your work? Why is this happening?						Y	Y
What (if anything) has changed about the way different parts of the system interact because of GEO's work? What is bringing any changes about?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
What is the best thing to come from our collective DI stone soup work in Nova Scotia?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
What would make our collective DI stone soup work better?		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Reflections on the Theme: Are we Transforming Systems?

REFLECTIONS FROM OUR EVALUATION & LEARNING LEAD

The theme of our 2023-24 evaluation is transforming systems.

GEO's direct work is about making sure everyone in Nova Scotia, no matter what their life circumstances are, has access to devices and the Internet, and that they have the skills and confidence to be online safely. And really we want to do more than that. We know that *Digital Inclusion has the power to transform lives*.

Stories and feedback from people involved in this work tells us people's lives are transforming. People are able to access information, services, supports, education, employment, banking and entertainment, to extend limited resources, and to keep in touch with their families and friends. Participants are telling us they feel connected, informed, included, empowered, seen, supported, and hopeful.

We want to know what changes for people next. Now that they feel empowered and hopeful, how do their lives change? What are the ripple effects of being lifted up? What does that mean for communities? Over the next year we are going to start looking at stories more closely so we can see patterns and deepen our understanding of how lives transform through Digital Inclusion.

Individual community members are each a part of the Digital Inclusion ecosystem, along with community organizations, businesses, and government. It's important to look at what's changing for each part, and then look at how they interact.

For community organizations we know that connecting people makes it easier to reach their participants, they can provide important services to more people who need them, and they can better serve their communities.

Partners in the private sector are appreciating the importance of getting everyone online. They told us that working together has more impact than working alone. And their reputations are strengthened when people see them doing good works, which attracts more business. They would like to work on other initiatives together, and they love feeling part of something bigger than themselves that is changing lives.

Government partners tell us they can reach community members more quickly and efficiently when they are online. That means they can connect people with resources, supports, and programs they need and couldn't otherwise access. Connecting people helps government departments achieve their mandates. Our government partners said they are working more closely with each other now, and that their new Digital Inclusion partnerships are augmenting support to community members.

In our **Story of Transformation**, we explain that we are looking for more than change in each part of the system; we want to transform how the parts of the system interact with each other. Doing that means working collectively and at multiple levels. It means focusing on trusting and respectful relationships (the magic ingredient in our work), and it means working from a place of love and kindness.

There are different things we can look for to tell us if and how systems are transforming. These include shifts in mindset and culture; like changing beliefs and values, new narratives and discourses, more collaboration and trust.

Structural changes can also be a sign of transforming systems. These changes could be policy changes, distributing resources differently, and forming new networks and partnerships.

Other signs of transformation are about changing relationships and power dynamics. These changes could show up as more involvement and decision-making power for people in equity-deserving communities, sharing power in equitable ways, and with the emergence of new leaders and innovative governance structures.

In the long-term, successful systems transformation improves social and environmental conditions, reduces inequalities and injustices, and increases system resiliency and adaptability. It's too early in the Digital Inclusion work to expect changes of that scope.

After two years as an organization, we began looking for early signs of that transformation.

First we looked for shifts in mindset and culture. **Partners told us they are seeing a new kind of collaboration emerge, one based on shared purpose and values, emphasizing respect and consideration for everyone involved.**

"[I see systems shifting in the] partnership culture in the values of GEO and how it comes through the work. It's not lip service. I see it in the etiquette in meetings, the way GEO treats people, the focus on different groups in the community, the language in surveys ..."

They value the opportunity to learn from our approach and want to adopt it in their organizations.

"The constant learning from GEO - we reflect on what GEO is doing and the processes GEO follows (e.g., evaluation approach, person-centred approach), and think about how we can use these best practices in our own work."

Our partners embrace our learning culture. They enjoy the flexibility and openness of experimenting and reflecting together about what works and where to adapt. This creates a culture of creativity and innovation, where people are not afraid to think outside the box and take risks to find better solutions. **This has led to new solutions and unexpected collaborations in other areas.**

"Because of connections made through GEO, I was able to address a challenge in my workplace - a conversation with GEO led to a new way of thinking about things - and connections, partners you can tap into".

We also looked for structural changes as an early signal of systems transformation.

Collaborating on Digital Inclusion work has fostered stronger relationships and trust between partners, leading to increased cooperation in other ventures. Organizations and groups are also reaching beyond their usual partners to build stronger networks and connections for better support of community members.

"The impact of GEO's Digital Inclusion work extends beyond direct device and Internet provision, leading to new partnerships, expanded service offerings, and increased collaboration across sectors (government, community organizations, business, schools, community members), driven by a shared commitment to Digital Inclusion. It also enhances and augments existing relationships and opens up new possibilities for collaboration and expanded partners' focus."

"It feels like there is a collective understanding that by pooling our resources and working together, the power exists within the collective and it does not rest with one or two leading organizations. Resources are allocated without bias or restriction, with a focus more on what resources are appropriate or which resources can work where others cannot".

"For me the best thing is helping more people get online, and second is the feeling of connection and support from partner organizations".

Another signal of structural change is **resources, in this case for devices and the Internet, being distributed differently, with an emphasis on equity**. This is possible because of the diversity of GEO's Referral Partners and the relationships and trust they have with community members who are usually excluded from society.

"The best thing about community organizations, GEO, government, and community members working together to get everyone online is that more Nova Scotians are being reached than if one organization took this on themselves. Having a diverse group of community organizations as referral partners means that some Nova Scotians who are in need but might not be connected to certain organizations can still be reached by the program".

Finally, we looked for signs of changing relationships and power dynamics in our Digital Inclusion work. People in equity-deserving communities certainly play a significant role in GEO's work as Referral Partners, as program Participants, and as GEO Team members.

Partners appreciate the role this diversity of perspectives plays in deepening our collective understanding of community members' lived experiences. It helps us work respectfully with each other and improve the ways we work to get equity-deserving communities online.

Overall, there are many signs that GEO's work is beginning to transform systems. One that came up perhaps most often is that **people are now thinking and openly talking about working with love and kindness** - for community members, for community partners, for private sector partners, for government, for each other. And this spills over everywhere ...

"Participants have told me that it shows people care about them, and understand the financial pressures people are facing. It is often disbelief that this help is available."

PART 7 Looking Ahead

In the near future, some of the new ingredients we'd like to add to the Digital Inclusion stone soup include ...

- **First Next Steps**

First Next Steps

GEO is proud to play a leadership role with a strong and caring (and growing!) network of partners and community members who are creating a big pot of Digital Inclusion stone soup for Nova Scotia.

Together, over the past year (2023-24) we've experienced several accomplishments, including:

- Contributing to systems transformation
- Creating a shared framework and language for talking about Digital Inclusion
- Building a strong and diverse network of partners working together to address Digital Inclusion
- Building awareness of Digital Inclusion in Nova Scotia
- Fostering a culture of learning and innovation
- Welcoming 39 organizations as GEO Referral Partners
- Welcoming 2,024 new participants to GEO
- Distributing 2,009 devices, 1,359 Internet connections, 168 mobile phones, and 126 mobile phone plans
- Providing 24 training sessions for 121 Digital Champions in Nova Scotia, and 23 partners working with newcomers in other parts of Canada
- Positively impacted Participants, who are more connected with families, friends, and communities, accessing online services and supports, studying and working, and feeling hopeful and empowered
- Equipping community organizations to offer important programs and better serve their participants
- Helping government build new partnerships, reach more people, and provide resources, supports, and services to community members
- Leveraging resources and in-kind contributions from private sector partners, and helping them be part of something bigger that serves a higher purpose
- Piloting an employment program onlIne
- Providing mobile phones and data plans to women experiencing gender-based violence
- Strengthening GEO's organizational infrastructure to support Digital Inclusion
- Working with love and kindness

Going forward from this point we have identified several areas where we can grow and improve, and some first next steps for continuing to build Digital Inclusion together in Nova Scotia.

Sustainability: GEO is primarily funded by the provincial government on an annual basis, and nearly all of the funding comes from the Department of Community Services. We will continue to cultivate strategic and genuine relationships within government, and continue to explore potential collaborations with several other departments who are actively interested in Digital Inclusion. We will also continue to cultivate our relationships with private sector partners, and leverage the resources they can contribute to our work.

Expansion and growth: There are still thousands of people in Nova Scotia who do not have access to devices and the Internet, and great demand for GEO to grow. And there is a tension between responding quickly and responding well. It will be important to scale strategically while addressing the complexity of needs. We will continue to develop our expertise and strategic planning for long-term success.

Increasing awareness of Digital Inclusion: Working with our partners we will continue to build awareness about Digital Inclusion and what it means, and work for policy changes that address connectivity and affordability issues. We will host our first Digital Inclusion conference in October 2024, and it will include awards to recognize bright lights working for Digital Inclusion in Nova Scotia.

GEO will continue to mature as an organization, and there are several areas we will focus on internally to strengthen our work.

Infrastructure: Continuing to define our policies and cybersecurity measures, developing a robust disaster recovery plan, establishing a scalable human resources information system.

Programming: Expanding GEO Connects to include smartphones, exploring mobile solutions for communities without connectivity, assessing gaps, building/strengthening relationships with community organizations serving diverse communities, enhancing communication and feedback loops between the GEO Team and Referral Partners over time.

Salesforce (our information management system): System improvements (e.g., for GEO Mobile data collection, Digital Champions data), SMS communications, mobiles with translation apps for newcomers, improving request processes to give Referral Partners more flexibility.

Digital Champions: Providing training tailored to Referral Partners' needs, fostering a community of Digital Champions through a dedicated portal, facilitating learning experiences through partnerships (e.g., Mhor Collective), and utilizing Salesforce for data management and training session tracking to empower Digital Champions.

Evaluation and Learning: Enhancing data utilization, measuring impact, crafting and sharing compelling stories that link Digital Inclusion to belonging and community, engaging participants regularly, and offering learning sessions to grow a collective understanding of addressing Digital Inclusion effectively.

GEO NOVA SCOTIA

getting everyone online

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE REPORT

We are very interested in your thoughts about this report.

Please share your reflections here.

We are listening!

Thank You!

Contact us

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