



2021-2022 Evaluation Report

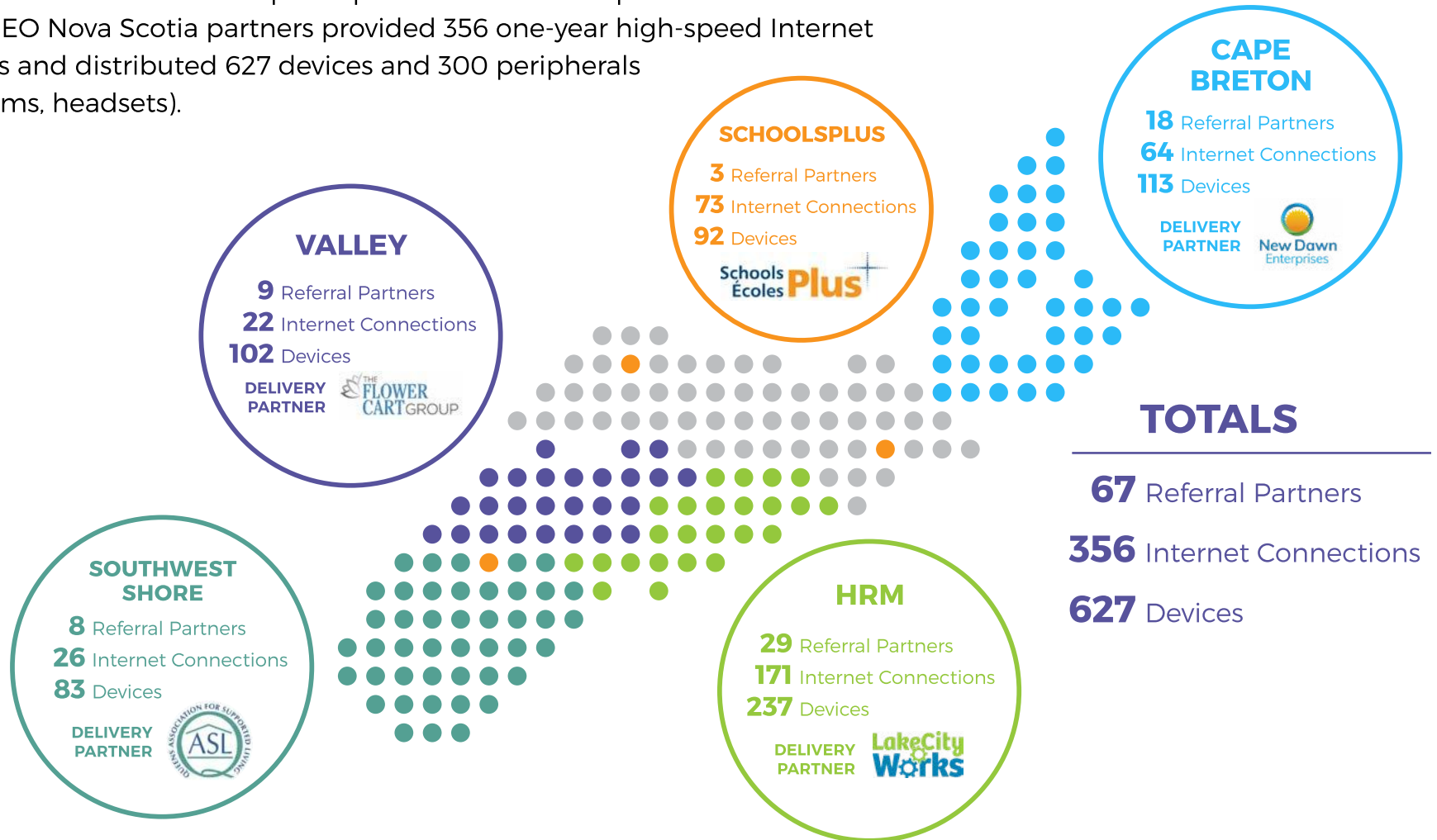
Table of Contents

Summary.....	ii
Acknowledgements	v
2021-2022 Evaluation Report	1
GEO Background	2
Evaluation Purpose/Process.....	4
Key Findings.....	5
Next Steps/Update.....	12



Summary

Building on the collective efforts of a number of Dartmouth North organizations to address the need for community members to access the Internet during the pandemic, Getting Everyone Online (GEO) Nova Scotia was piloted in four regions of Nova Scotia over a period of twelve months. The GEO network was made up of four delivery partners connected to sixty-seven referral partners, who invited the people their organizations work with to participate in GEO. From April 1st 2021 to March 31st 2022, GEO Nova Scotia partners provided 356 one-year high-speed Internet connections and distributed 627 devices and 300 peripherals (e.g., webcams, headsets).



An evaluation was conducted in early 2022 to identify key findings and learnings to inform GEO's future work. GEO's Learning & Evaluation Lead and two volunteers from each GEO region who wanted to build their evaluation capacity collected data by:

- reviewing GEO documents,
- interviewing 40 GEO participants,
- facilitating three story sharing sessions with GEO participants, and
- surveying 39 referral partners.

Findings show that having devices and Internet access changed people's lives for the better:

- People are **less isolated**
- People are **able to participate in training/education**
- People are pursuing **independent learning**
- People have been able to **access health/ mental health services**
- People can **meet specific needs of their children**
- People's **financial burden is relieved** and they can stretch their budgets to cover other expenses
- People are **maintaining jobs**
- People are **building job skills**
- People's **lifestyles have improved**
- People are more **informed about their communities**

Referral partners reported that connecting individuals to devices/Internet is having a positive impact on communities as a whole as well:

- **Communities are more connected to the world** and feel empowered and less isolated through connecting with others and participating in online events, accessing services and resources, and learning
- **Communities are accessing services** such as learning supports, mandated programs that support families, crisis prevention supports, government information and resources
- **Communities are more inclusive.** Internet access reduces barriers (e.g., mental health obstacles, transportation, lack of finances) and offers options for more community members to access services, find/ maintain employment, engage in community. More people see themselves as valuable community members

The conditions in place that helped referral partners effectively get people connected included:

- Efficient and timely communication with the GEO Coordinator
- An efficient referral system and very smooth process
- Having the devices on location
- Referral partners' existing close relationships with their clients

Nearly half of referral partners said some of their clients/program participants experienced **barriers to participating in GEO**; primarily due to a lack of Internet availability in their communities, and people lacking the skills required to use the devices/Internet.

GEO participants asked referral partners for help they could not always provide, such as getting the Internet connected, teaching people how to use devices, showing people how to navigate the Internet for information/services, and troubleshooting problems.

When asked **how to make GEO better**, participants and referral partners suggested:

- Building digital literacy skills and teaching people how to use the devices and Internet
- Expanding GEO to make it accessible to more people
- Extending the Internet coverage beyond a year
- Creating a pay-what-you-can option for Internet
- Offering a wider range of devices (including mobile phones with data packages) and broader Internet access or solutions to rural service gaps
- Offering supports or adaptations for people who have disabilities

Based on the experience and learnings from the pilot project and on regular feedback from strategic partners, delivery partners, referral partners and participants, GEO's next steps will include:

- Carefully and strategically planning the next year's work
- Expanding its geographical reach by establishing partnerships with additional Internet service providers
- Developing and launching the first **Digital Champions** program in Canada, supporting one-on-one basic computer skills training through a network of service-delivery partners in the public and community sectors
- Developing and piloting a pay-what-you-can model that provides high-quality connectivity and/or devices at costs that are geared to income
- Continuing no-or-low cost internet service to all existing pilot project participants
- Exploring opportunities to offer data packages and cell phones, pursue special projects, and co-create a resource hub for digital skill-building

Acknowledgements

GEO is an illustration of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. A number of partners came together in an unprecedented pandemic moment to address a critical need for access to devices and Internet and made it happen. Then, as emergent work does, GEO evolved into what it needed to be: a pilot project that has now become an organization with a provincial scope to “Get Everyone Online”.

Thank you to the original GEO Advisory Team for adeptly guiding his initiative:

- Bette Watson-Borg
- Craig Menzies
- Danielle Pentland
- Erika Shea
- Jodene Dunleavy
- Kyle Walsh
- Liam O’Rourke
- Lynne McCarron
- Robert Chisholm
- Sabrina Vatcher
- Sandra McKenzie
- Sophie Eld

Thank you to the original partners in Dartmouth North, to the Delivery Partners, and to all of the Referral Partners who have contributed and continue to contribute to this work.

Thank you to the Evaluation Working Group who shaped and supported the evaluation process:

- Abbie Betts (New Dawn Enterprises)
- Amy Woolvet (Queen’s Association for Community Living)
- Danielle Pentland (LakeCity Works)
- Jodene Duleavy (Nova Scotia Office of Priorities and Planning)
- Kyle Walsh (Flower Cart)
- Matt Spurway (GEO)
- Rayna Preston (Nova Scotia GovLab, Department of Advanced Education)
- Sabrina Vatcher (New Dawn Enterprises)

It has been a joy to work with and learn from the team of learners who conducted this evaluation. Thank you for contributing your time and curiosity, and your wisdom about how to respectfully engage people in your communities:

- Amy Woolvett (Queen’s Association for Community Living)
- Brandon Stevens (Valley Community Learning Association)
- Jenna MacKenzie (Pathways to Employment)
- Kyla MacAskil (Cape Breton Community Housing Association)
- Kyle Walsh (Flower Cart)
- Nichole Carver (LakeCity Works)
- Thomas Hatfield (LakeCity Works)

Finally, heartfelt thanks to everyone who took part in the evaluation interviews, story sharing sessions, and surveys. We are taking your contributions and experiences forward with great respect.



2021-2022 Evaluation Report

GEO Background

The Getting Everyone Online (GEO) Project started during the March 2020 pandemic lockdown when it became clear that everyone needed access to the Internet and many people couldn't afford it. A number of service organizations in Dartmouth North created a collective strategy to provide devices and Internet access to community members so they wouldn't be isolated.

By the end of the year, with a network of local partners, the collective distributed 50 refurbished computers with webcams and provided free home Internet access to 40 households that couldn't otherwise afford it.

In 2021, with investments from the Province of Nova Scotia and other funders, and generous support from strategic partners, the "GEO Project" became "GEO Nova Scotia", and 12-month pilot programs were established in HRM, Cape Breton, the Valley, and the South West Shore.



We talk about service providers working in silos and this is a time when that certainly did not happen. Everybody was really working together, and it was noticeable. That's what I really enjoyed about working with GEO.



This table shows the delivery partners (who participated in an advisory committee and facilitated connections with referral partners in each region) and the number of referral partners (who invited the people their organizations work with to participate in GEO) by each region, as well as the number of Internet connections and devices provided. From March 1st 2021 to March 31st 2022, GEO Nova Scotia partners provided 356 one year high speed Internet connections and distributed 627 devices and over 300 peripherals (e.g., webcams, headsets).

According to the information some people provided about the number of people in their households, GEO directly reached 911 people (if everyone had provided this information the actual number would be higher).

In March 2022, GEO Nova Scotia was formally registered as a non-profit society; it coordinates a growing network of partners working together to ensure people in the province have what they need to access the Internet.

GEO REGION	DELIVERY PARTNERS	# OF REFERRAL PARTNERS	# OF INTERNET CONNECTIONS	# OF DEVICES
Cape Breton	New Dawn Enterprises	18	64	113
HRM	LakeCity Works	29	171	237
Southwest Shore	Queen's Association for Community Living	8	26	83
Valley	Flower Cart	9	22	102
SchoolsPlus	LakeCity Works	3	73	92
TOTAL		67	356	627

Evaluation Purpose/Process

This evaluation was conducted from January to April 2022 by GEO's Learning & Evaluation Lead and two volunteers from each GEO region who wanted to build their evaluation capacity. The team held skill building sessions to learn about each phase of evaluation (e.g., planning, data collection, analysis, sensemaking, reporting), and then practiced these skills by doing the evaluation.

The evaluation team collected data through:

- Reviewing GEO documents and spreadsheets
- Interviews (by Zoom, phone, or in-person) with 40 GEO participants
- 3 story sharing session with participants, and
- A survey with 39 referral partners

The team shared the findings with GEO partners at an online gathering in April 2022, and discussed next steps in GEO's work.

The purpose of this evaluation is to report the key findings and learnings from the pilot projects to inform GEO's future work.



Key Findings

HOW PEOPLE ARE USING DEVICES/INTERNET

The top ways people report using their devices/Internet since receiving them are:

1. Social connections with family and friends
2. Entertainment
3. Education (school or training)



It is a huge cost savings because I don't have to pay for child care because I can work from home. I was working part-time before this but it was costing me more money and more time away from my child, now we are together and I am financially better off.

People participating in GEO are using their devices/Internet in many different ways:

DEVICE/ INTERNET USE	REPORTED BY:	
	Participants	Referral Partners about Participants
Social connections with family and friends	83%	84%
Entertainment	80%	74%
Staying informed/getting the news	65%	58%
Video chats (e.g., Zoom, Facetime)	60%	55%
Education (school or training)	58%	74%
Education (self-learning)	53%	68%
Accessing health services or programs	43%	68%
Job searching	38%	18%
Accessing other government services or benefits	33%	71%
Banking	33%	65%
Shopping	28%	42%
Employment (working online)	18%	39%
Volunteering	8%	16%

IMPACT ON PEOPLE'S LIVES

Having devices and Internet connection has changed people's lives for the better. Referral partners and participants identified these impacts in particular:

- **People are less isolated** and they can connect with family.
- **People have been able to participate in training/education.** Their children are also able to do their schoolwork.
- They are also pursuing **independent learning**.
- People have been able to **access health/ mental health services**.
- They can also **meet specific needs of their children**.
- It has **relieved a financial** burden and people have been able to stretch their budgets to cover other expenses.
- People have been able to **maintain jobs**. They are also building job skills.
- Their **lifestyles have improved** and they are **more informed about what is going on in the community**.

“ These options to connect with friends and families now has significantly reduced my isolation, and it turn has no doubt supported my mental illness and addiction issues.

“ I was homeless. I moved into a new home out of the shelter, and GEO came soon after. It made a huge difference in my funding, which helped keep me out of the shelters and staying in my own home and attending school.

“ I am now able to do my studies from home and don't have to worry about finding transportation or childcare.

“ I feel more free in my life, I feel like I have an advantage that I have never had before. I have access to everything and I want to make more use of it now that I am learning more about it. There are lots of entrepreneurship opportunities with the internet and I would like to get into that, just hard to know what to trust, but I am learning.

“ I also can find a family physician and access healthcare in a way that I could not previously. When I have conversations with my healthcare support group I can take control of my health and understand it a little more by looking things up on the internet or talking to others. Most of the above was either not available to me, or very inaccessible for me to access regularly.

“ My Autistic child needs access to a sensory app for therapeutic purposes on the laptop to calm him down in stressful instances.

“ I didn't have a laptop or internet before due to the price because I could not afford it, so this program has allowed me to access it for the first time, opening many new doors but also allowing me to allocate funds to other things like groceries etc.

“ Everything ... would be extremely difficult without access to the internet. I could not educate myself to get my job back. Now with the internet I can take control of my learning and go for my previous jobs and apply to new ones.

“ I have more access to everything it feels, I can look for a job and search things up and learn more which I like. I have never had anything like this before. I am also going to start chair yoga, I can watch videos on-line and follow along, I would have never been able to do anything like this before.

IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

More than three-quarters of referral partners said that connecting individuals to devices/Internet is having an impact on the community as a whole.

In terms of **improved connection** they noted that:

- Communities are more connected to the world
- Community members are more able to connect to events (such as national conferences)
- Community groups can connect with other groups across the province for service delivery
- Community members have a sense of empowerment through connecting with others
- Connected community members are at less risk of isolation and more able to be engaged with others
- Connected community members are more able to access resources
- Connected community members are learning

In terms of **accessing services**, referral partners commented that devices and Internet connection allows community members to access:

- Tutoring services and online learning
- Mandated programs such as parenting or anger management programs, which will help reunite families
- Community supports which will prevent or reduce crisis situations
- Improved digital literacy skills, which allow them to better access and utilize information for life and work, and leads to greater access to community resources
- Government information and resources

“While our participants were connected to GEO through Schools Plus to provide internet service to recently settled families with school aged children, the families had the added advantage of using online programs to prepare themselves for Canadian citizenship. They have also been able to attend online Citizenship Ceremonies for others in their community.

Referral partners also talked about how devices/Internet access make communities **more inclusive**:

- People who sometimes experience barriers with connecting to community due to their mental health are now able to connect to the community in other ways through the use of technology - this includes more voices and experiences within the community
- Allowing folks to maintain physical and mental health and allow for engagements with others in the community are key to well being.
- People can be connected in a way that doesn't drain our resources. Services are more accessible for those who have barriers to transportation, including finances. We are able to feel less socially isolated, expand our community of contacts, look for work, access training and so much more.
- It is making fuller participation of people with autism possible. Income barriers are a big obstacle for many people with autism who are unable to navigate complex social systems and referrals without a reliable computer and internet.
- Having free internet and devices is helping to reduce the barrier to employment for people living on a low income.
- More access to people job searching, and greater community engagement.

Referral partners said **communities are impacted positively when community members achieve their personal education and employment goals**. They noted that the ability to participate in training has led to employment and self-sufficiency and getting out of the Income Assistance system, and boosted people's ability to see themselves as valuable community members.

“Getting everyone online is a critical and vital aspect of surviving in today's world. We're seeing, particularly in marginalized communities, people who inherently have less access to opportunity. Just being able to provide internet access is making this gap smaller, life more equitable and bringing people closer together.

Referral partners noted that having **devices/Internet connection reduces employment barriers** for community members living on a low income by increasing access to job searching and employment opportunities.

They listed several other ways that access to devices/Internet connections impacted their communities, including;

- Students were able to continue learning during Covid and school closures
- No-cost Internet allowed people to stretch their limited resources to cover other necessities and emergency needs, and has made it possible for individuals who otherwise are disenfranchised and unable to better themselves due to inaccessibility to catch up, and improve their standard of living
- Each person who is able to be connected to a device/ internet is less at risk of isolation; able to be engaged with others and feel connected to their community/ school readily during a time when physical engagement has been limited
- People are able to shop and access entertainment
- Reducing the need for emergency services

They also commented that **Internet access is essential**, especially now, due to so many services being temporarily offered solely online or have now/will become only accessible virtually. The more people who have access, the better for the community, they say. They noted that Internet accessibility requires digital literacy.



GEO CHALLENGES

Nearly half of referral partners said some of their clients/program participants could not participate in GEO. The top two reasons they couldn't participate were that Internet service wasn't available where they lived and that they didn't have the skills required to use the devices/Internet.

Referral partners described supports people asked for that they couldn't provide, such as help getting the Internet connected, explaining how to use the devices, explaining how to navigate the Internet to access information or services, and troubleshooting problems.

They identified possible solutions, including offering support for people to learn how to use the devices/Internet, offering data packages so people could access the Internet through cell phones, and offering support or adaptations for people who have disabilities.

The factors in place that helped get people connected included:

- Efficient and timely communication with the GEO Coordinator
- An efficient referral system and very smooth process
- Having the devices on location (so they didn't have to be delivered from another part of the province)
- Referral partners' existing close relationships with their clients, their willingness to promote GEO within their organizations, their invitation for clients to reach out to them, and their familiarity with providing tech support.

“ I should have gotten more support, it's just sitting there – I need help with research, looking for movie or doing a project or to check to see what is new at theater, what the new movies are. All the covid-19 info is online, that is why I thought it would be a good idea to get it, but I don't know how to access it and I was too afraid to ask, having people thinking I am not smart enough for this. Between you and me it goes over my head.

“ GEO Nova Scotia applied a trauma informed approach when dealing with our participants who had experienced struggles and stigma associated with living in poverty. The GEO staff understood the sense of risk they were feeling which made our participants feel protected and supported.

IMPROVING GEO

When asked how to make GEO better:

- Participants and referral partners said the program would be better if it also built digital literacy skills, or taught people how to use the devices and Internet.
- Participants and referral partners suggested that GEO would be better if more people could access it, and if the Internet were extended beyond a year - and/or if a pay-what-you-can option were created.
- Referral partners suggested offering a wider range of devices (including mobile phones with data packages) and broader Internet access or solutions to rural service gaps.

“ There should be a version of this program for seniors to get them connected. Seniors probably need more support on how to use the computer and Internet. It would be great to get more seniors online - so many are lonely, have no one around to talk to and are cooped up. This program could get them access to books, groceries, and other people.

FINALLY, MANY PARTICIPANTS EXPRESSED THEIR APPRECIATION FOR GEO.

“ This is the most creative and most useful supportive service that anyone could ever imagine.

“ I was really touched by the program and how it was designed to be the most helpful rather than just doing the bare minimum.

Next Steps/Update

GEO has become a standalone organization with a Board of Directors, and has received funding from the Province of Nova Scotia to continue its efforts to get everyone online across Nova Scotia.

Based on the experience and learnings from the pilot project and on continual feedback from strategic partners, delivery partners, referral partners and participants, GEO's next steps will include:

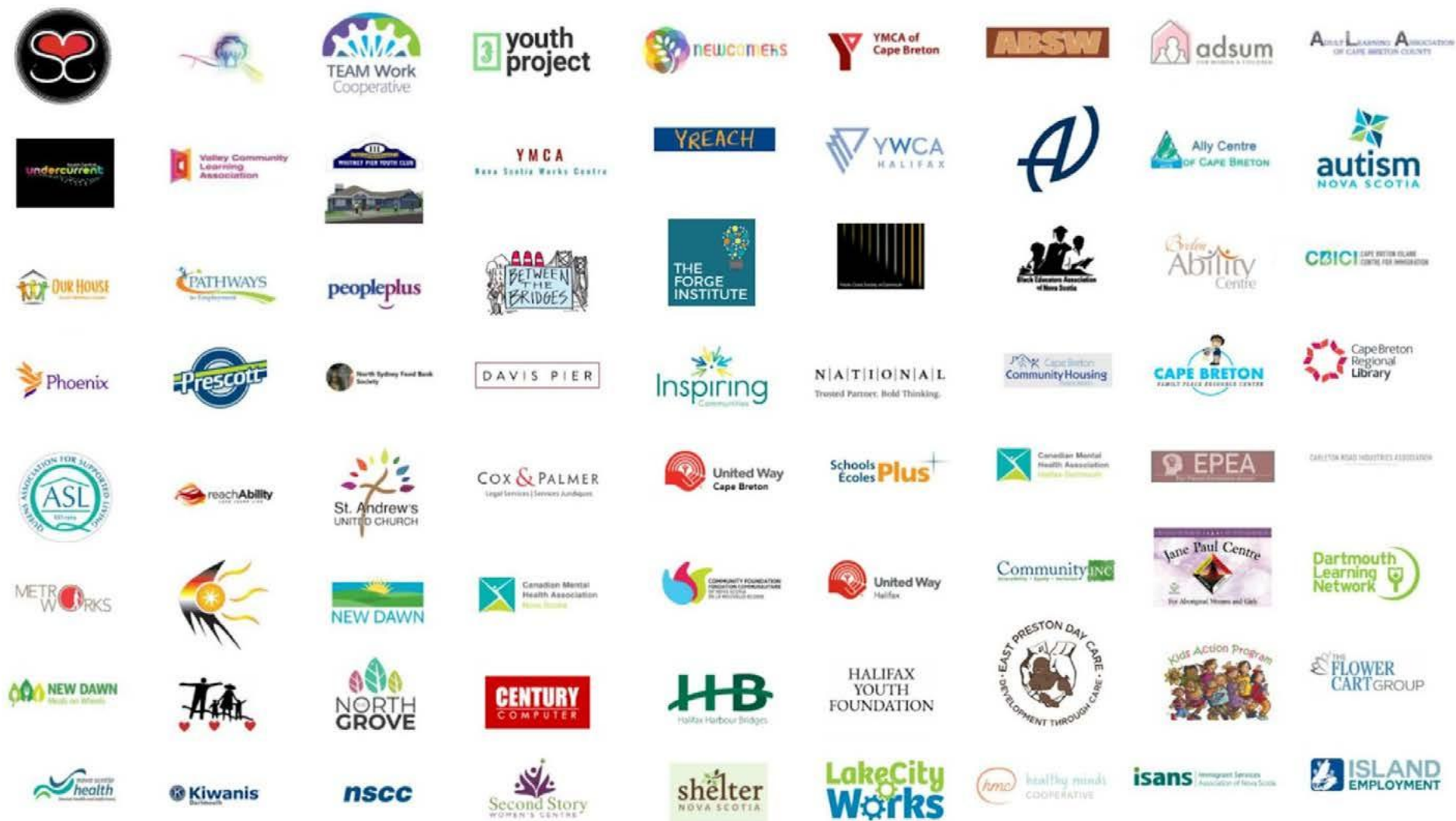
- Expanding its geographical reach by establishing partnerships with additional Internet service providers
- Developing and launching the first **Digital Champions** program in Canada, supporting one-on-one basic computer skills training through a network of service-delivery partners in the public and community sectors
- Developing and piloting a pay-what-you-can model that provides high-quality connectivity and/or devices at costs that are geared to income
- Continuing no-or-low cost internet service to all existing pilot project participants
- Exploring opportunities to offer data packages and cell phones, pursue special projects, and co-create a resource hub for digital skill-building

GEO plans to explore opportunities to:

- Offer data packages
- Offer cell phones
- Coordinate and pursue special projects such as the digital booth, digital gazebos, and whole-building wi-fi solutions
- Co-create a resource hub for online and in-person opportunities for digital skill-building



Thank you to our partners





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