

North Shore libraries & TELUS partner to distribute free tech to those in need

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When these libraries closed their doors to the public as a social distancing measure, many of their services, from device help to events and programs, moved online. However, Sarah Felkar, Head of Technology for the West Vancouver Memorial Library, was concerned about one service in particular — the use of public internet stations.

“Nearly 500 people each day use public library computers across the North Shore, and most of them have no other access to technology,” said Felkar. “Without access to the internet, and with many services and daily social connections withdrawn in response to the pandemic, these community members are especially vulnerable to the feelings of loneliness and stress that accompany isolation, change in routine and uncertainty.”

Felkar reached out to TELUS on behalf of the three North Shore library systems and TELUS donated hundreds of tablets and phones. The libraries will distribute the devices through an initiative called Take-home Technology, with the help of community agencies working with North Shore Emergency Management. “We decided to share the devices through these agencies, as they have existing client bases of people in need and can roll them out quickly,” said Stephanie Hall, Director of the West Vancouver Memorial Library.

The devices will help combat isolation by connecting people with friends, family and library and government resources. The libraries provide ongoing user support online and by phone, along with access to a wide array of free downloadable books, movies, music and classes. The phones come with nationwide calling and texting, along with a basic data plan. Those who receive tablets and do not have access to Wi-Fi may apply for a low-cost plan through TELUS Internet for Good.

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“Public libraries provide a critical bridge to the digital divide in our communities. It’s not just the equipment, but the expertise, training and consistent staff support that help to connect our neighbours to each other and to life-saving information surrounding the pandemic,” Deb Hutchison Koep, Chief Librarian at North Vancouver City Library, said.

“When we closed our facilities, many people were instantly cut off from that access — this initiative is a great step to rebuild that bridge and reconnect with those in our community who most need our help.”

“Our libraries have a longstanding practice of being great equalizers by providing unfettered, equitable access to shared resources in our communities,” added North Vancouver District Public Library’s Director, Jacqueline van Dyk. “It is incredibly heartening to witness the resilience of spirit across the North Shore; organizations are banding together to ensure that our neighbours and friends are taken care of. This donation of technology from TELUS is a welcome gift. With this contribution, North Shore libraries can work with key local groups to facilitate the delivery of this technology to those in our community who need it the most.”

The initiative was inspired by the work of the West Vancouver Seniors’ Activity Centre (SAC), where people from across the country have been donating gently used tablets for local seniors in need. The SAC then delivers the tablets, and the library provides ongoing user support as the seniors learn to use them. The SAC is still accepting donations, which are greatly appreciated. North Vancouver District Public Library will also accept donated tablets from residents.