We've all felt restricted. Visits with neighbours, friends, and family members – no more, or at least extremely limited. Classes, movies, restaurant meals – those also haven't been happening. As for haircuts, just don't look too closely at the mirror. It's been an adjustment, one we had to make, but still a hard one.

Older adults have been particularly vulnerable to COVID. They've been urged to stay safe and stay home. Keeping them away from one type of danger, though, exposes them to others – feelings of isolation and depression. When there are fewer in-person contacts, technology takes on a central role – one that began even before COVID but has accelerated since then.

I'd tell you my name, but you already know me. I come in many forms – some of them with captions, large buttons, and bright screens to make life easier. Here is just some of what I can do.	
	• *Videoconferencing* lets you see and talk with friends, family, and colleagues even when you're not in the same room. You can even watch films or videos together. • *Internet* connects you to an even larger community. It adds colour to your days. You can take a tour, learn a language, take exercise classes, play games, or try out painting, writing, or music. You can order groceries, meals, or medications. • *Monitoring devices* warn you if there is an intruder. Wearable ones know if you fall. They can monitor temperature, blood pressure, and heartbeat. They report data to your doctor's practice. If the numbers don't look right, you'll get a call. • *Online booking* can get you a virtual doctor's appointment, avoiding the waiting time and the old magazines. When doctors see you in your own environment, they may get a better picture of your needs. You can tell the doctor what's wrong. You can even show the doctor what's wrong. Then you don't need to come in unless it's really necessary. • *Voice assistants* with catchy names help control your home. They can be sure your doors are locked. They can schedule tasks and even tell other devices to do some of the work.

It all sounds wonderful, right? It is when it works, but that doesn't just happen.

We sometimes talk about technology as if it's one large item. Actually, it's many smaller ones – televisions, internet, computers, smart phones, and other devices. Each one has to be bought, set up, and maintained, and not everyone can take advantage of what they offer.

- **They can be expensive.** The best features, the smoothest functioning, go with higher end devices. Some people, particularly older adults and those with low incomes, don't have smart phones. Home monitoring and reporting can cost hundreds of dollars. Specialized software and ongoing maintenance add more expense.
- **Internet service is inconsistent.** In 2016, the United Nations declared Internet access a human right, but even in Canada, about half of low-income families don't have access to high-speed Internet at home. It's the ones who need it the most – those living in remote and rural areas – who have the least access.
- **Using technology takes training and support.** Manuals are hard to follow. Online instructions and videos are no good if your computer won't even let you go online. Systems change and upgrade without our permission. Equipment needs maintenance. Users need reliable help.

- ***Underlying systems aren't robust.*** If you've tried to book a COVID vaccination or even arrange a Zoom call, you know what frustration feels like. Phone lines beep, calls disconnect, screens go blank.

Before too long, we hope, we can look forward to more freedom. We can also look forward to even more reliance on technology. For example, doctors can now bill the provincial health insurance plan for virtual visits. Ontario's government is investing in expanding virtual health care. Funds will support videoconferencing, remote monitoring, secure messaging equipment, and frontline home and community care providers.

What makes technologies work for older adults will make them work for all Ontarians. They need to be accessible to everyone, regardless of income, location, language, or disability. We need to know that:

- ***They are affordable.*** Income shouldn't be a barrier to using necessary equipment and services.
- ***They are available.*** People in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities need reliable Internet. In 2016, the CRTC, Canada's national telecommunications regulator, declared broadband internet a basic and essential telecommunications service for all Canadians. Providers were to start boosting service and speeds in rural and isolated areas. It hasn't happened fast enough for many people.
- ***We can trust them.*** Systems are secure, and private information stays private.
- ***Support systems are in place.*** Systems for repair, maintenance, and help are reliable and affordable.
- ***Public health care is protected.*** COVID opened a market for private virtual health services, which filled some gaps until the public system caught up. Patients may be paying for services that should be covered by provincial insurance. They are relying on providers who don't know them. Also, these services operate independently, so there is no government oversight; we have no way to know whether information they provide is accurate or trustworthy.
- ***The public sector is in charge.*** Private sector organizations will be developing and managing some of the new technologies. These organizations need to be held to government standards and be accountable for their services.

What can <u>you</u> do?

When you hear about a new or changed technology, ask questions.

- Who was consulted? What communities were involved?
- How can you provide input? How will your input be used?
- How will the technology work? Will everyone be able to use it? Will help be available?
- Who is paying? Can everyone afford the cost?
- How is it more or better than what we already have? Does it improve access? Does it improve quality?
- How is privacy protected?

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