PREVENTING OVERDOSE AMONG FORMERLY INCARCERATED PERSONS DURING A PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY

PREVAIL

Cell Phone Program Summary

Feb-Oct 2023

As part of the PREVAIL project, participants being released from provincial correctional centres in BC were provided a cell phone with a three-month data plan, preloaded with overdose prevention apps (Lifeguard and BRAVE).

The cell phones were given to participants by peer support staff at Unlocking the Gates Service Society (UTG) at the time of their release. In addition to the phone, participants received peer support from UTG over a three-month period. Support included transportation on the day of release, connection to health and social services, and other reintegration supports.

120 phones distributed

- 3 Month Plan
- 2 GB Data/month
- 1 cell phone

PARTICIPANT DATA

UTG staff collected participant data about cell use and access through surveys and interviews at three time points:

1) Day of release, n=120
2) One month post-release, n=58
3) Two months post-release, n=35

Participants were asked about their experiences using the phone, including any challenges. By the first follow-up post-release, 25% of participants still in the program were no longer in possession of their phones. Many of these participants either had their phone stolen or it was lost.

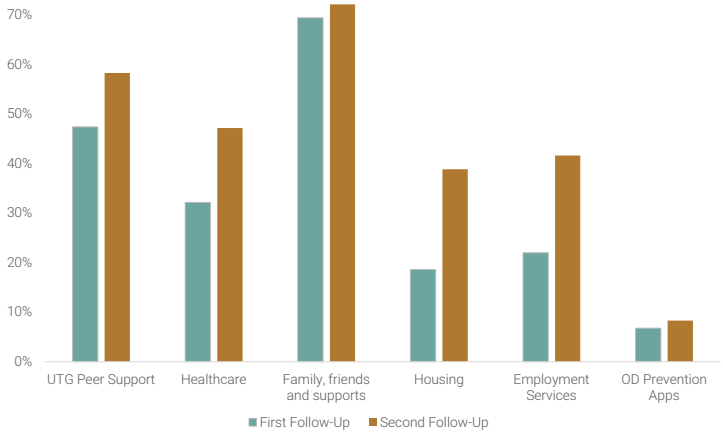
By the second month, the vast majority of participants were using their phones daily.

When asked about the benefits of having a cell phone, the majority of participants appreciated being able to keep in touch with loved ones, connecting to resources in the community, and feeling a sense of freedom.

Although all cell phones were automatically enrolled in a toxic drug alert system, which provides alerts about drug poisoning and up-to-date information about drug use, the majority of participants reported they did not receive any alerts on their phone.

	1 Month	2 Months
Daily Use Majority of participants used phone daily	71%	83%
Connecting with Family & Friends Contacting family and friends was the most frequent use for the phone	69%	72%
Accessing Housing Phone use for accessing housing services increased over time	19%	39%
Accessing Employment Phone use for accessing employment services increased over time	22%	42%

Services Accessed by Cell Phone



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PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS ON CELL PHONES

UTG staff asked participants to describe what it means to have a cell phone and how they use the phone in their daily lives. Beyond using the phone to access services to support the reintegration process, participants reflected on a number of ways the cell phone impacted their lives.

Social Lifeline

Cell phones are seen as vital to reintegration.

Other communication options are limited (e.g. public payphones are no longer available)

Cell phones provided a sense of relief as participants felt they had a 'lifeline' to their community.

It's been my lifeline, it's helped my taxes get done. It's reconnecting me to my family, you know it's allowed me to get my disability started...I don't know what I would have done without it.

It's like connectivity, freedom right? Being able to connect with people, make enquiries, do all that kind of stuff.

I feel like I'm actually part of society instead of walking around with nothing.

Two-Way Communication

Ability to both make AND receive phone calls was highly valuable.

Being reachable at any time or location is beneficial for accessing services, especially housing and employment

Cell phones improved the sense of connection among loved ones, including family, children, and partners.

Being able to get hold of people again and update my phone number and have a stable.. like, people can phone me and get hold of me.

I'll be able to be in contact with my family and have a number for my kids to be able to reach me.

Daily Support

Cell phones were used as a wayfinding tool (e.g. access to Google Maps) and helped participants navigate the community.

Cell phones connected participants to the internet to research topics of interest.

Cell phones helped participants stay organized, keep track of appointments, and set reminders for medications.

I use it for Google Maps, I use it for researching doctors and ... researching like self-help stuff, when it comes to regulating emotions or dealing with conflicts.

Google and learning about addiction. Learning about everything is how you become aware of it. And if you're aware of it, you can help.

Keeping Busy

Listening to music, playing games, and streaming videos on the cell phone was a way to have fun and keep busy.

Keeping busy was important for managing stress post-release.

Most of all [the phone] keeps music in my ears because that's what keeps my mind away from many other things and going off track. I think, honestly if I didn't have this thing right now, I'd probably be going inside.

It helps keep me calm ... [music] helps keep me out of my head.

I was using [the cell phone] to kill time ... But being stuck in the house ... My issue is boredom; I get bored, and I go and do stuff – stupid shit.