



## **Disaster Resilience and Trauma Work Group**

### **Harnessing digital mental health to improve equity in mental health care in the context of COVID-19: Needs, best-practices and opportunities in the Asia Pacific region**

#### Background and Rationale:

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has had unprecedented effects globally, including in the Asia-Pacific Region. The mental health effects of COVID-19 are expected to be profound, with the need for enhanced and targeted mental health care identified as urgent from the beginning of the outbreak. The mental health impacts of COVID-19 are still emerging and will become increasingly apparent as the longer-term impacts of the pandemic reverberate among populations.

Some groups are at higher risk of experiencing negative mental health effects without adequate access to care, including healthcare workers and others on the frontlines, essential workers, vulnerable groups such as people experiencing homelessness, migrants, and people living with existing mental health and substance use conditions, women, sexual minorities, children, the elderly, Indigenous communities and victims of domestic violence.

Digital technology has previously been recognized as having great potential to address gaps in access to evidence-based mental health care and there have been calls to increase the use of digital mental health in the context of COVID-19. Though digital mental health may improve access, there are also risks that it might exacerbate inequities in access to care among high-risk populations who may face poorer digital resources or other barriers. Equity-oriented research is needed to identify needs and gaps to equitable digital health care delivery

#### The opportunity:

The APEC Digital Hub for Mental Health, hosted in Canada, is a network of stakeholders representing researchers, healthcare providers, policy makers and people with lived experience (PWLE) from across the region. The Digital Hub's working group on Disaster Resilience and Trauma is leading a coordinated response to mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic. The APEC countries represent a tremendous opportunity for generation, synthesis and mobilization of new evidence on the use of digital technologies for mental health among high-risk populations in the context of COVID-19. APEC countries are currently at different stages of the pandemic, taking varying approaches to the development and roll-out of digital and virtual mental health care. This experience represents an important opportunity for cross-regional learning and mobilization.

#### Objectives:

The objectives of this work plan include to:

- 1) Conduct a needs assessment to identify the mental health needs specific to high-risk groups in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in the APEC region, including identifying barriers and opportunities for delivering care, and;
- 2) Identify best practices for using digital mental health to provide care to at-risk populations and in emergency settings.



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The overall goal is to conduct knowledge synthesis and mobilization to support planning and implementation of digital mental health initiatives with an emphasis on access by high-risk populations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic across the APEC region.

To achieve these goals, the Work Group will undertake the following activities:

- 1) A rapid review of peer-reviewed and grey literature on mental health needs and barriers of at-risk people in the APEC region and an online survey of Digital Hub members to identify ongoing mental health initiatives and challenges. This will inform the one-month knowledge synthesis and initial knowledge mobilization plan;
- 2) A 3-round Delphi consensus process involving surveys and online/ telephone consultations with policy makers, healthcare providers and PWLE;
- 3) A scoping-review of the use of digital mental health in emergency settings with a focus on equity and at-risk populations;
- 4) Knowledge mobilization via consultations, a policy brief and webinars to share recommendations for provision of mental health care to at-risk populations using digital technology in the context of COVID-19 in the APEC region.

#### Experience and Expertise:

Our team consists of a group of experts, including knowledge users, from nine APEC countries. The group brings research, care delivery and policy expertise in mental health, including mental health in emergency situations. Knowledge users are poised to apply the findings and recommendations to the delivery of enhanced digital mental health care for at-risk populations across the APEC region.