

Yukon Home Care Embraces E-Bikes

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Working collaboratively with other government departments, First Nations governments, medical facilities and community partners, the Yukon Home Care Program (YHCP) provides a multitude of territory-wide services such as care coordination, home support, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, social work and nursing. Service delivery in Whitehorse is made possible, in part, thanks to two battery-powered micro-mobility devices – otherwise known as ‘e-bikes’ and affectionately called “Speedy Tweety” and “Sylvester.”

Diversifying the Fleet

Considered integral to the YHCP vehicle fleet, Tweety and Sylvester are signed out like any other vehicle by staff members and have, since joining the team, covered a total of 69 kilometers. The two e-bikes have been used by nearly a dozen different staff members who are encouraged to use the e-bikes for home visits and travel to meetings, conferences, consultations and clinics within a 10-15 km radius of the Whitehorse Home Care office. They are also permitted to use the bikes for lunch and coffee runs to local restaurants which has helped improve staff morale.

Daytime use is typical but after dark travel is permitted providing proper safety precautions are exercised – including using front and rear lights together with wearing a helmet and high visibility clothing.

A simple e-bike sign out sheet is used to track usage and safety. The resulting statistics will be used in planning future growth in the initiative.

Items tracked include user name, date and departure time. The document also serves to remind users to perform the safety check: tires and brakes, seat adjustment, battery charge status, and the presence of a safety lock and helmet.

Home Care staff are authorized to use e-bikes once they have completed the appropriate education sessions which includes physical and theory training.

Tweety and Sylvester are not currently used in winter but with additional equipment such as winter tires, the team will be able to expand the initiative and are currently seeking approval to do so. When not in use, the e-bikes are kept with other fleet vehicles in a garage with batteries stored separately and recharged after every use.

Life in the Yukon is changing

According to *Our Clean Future – A Yukon strategy for climate change, energy and a green economy*, (p.36) the government is seeking to decrease the





"Speedy Tweety" (left) is a standard e-bike and "Sylvester" (right) is an e-cargo bike. Image courtesy of the YHCP.

percentage of commuting trips in Whitehorse made by drivers in single occupant vehicles to 55 percent of all trips by 2031.

Increasing the number of people who walk, bike and use public transit is all part of the overall plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Investments in public and active transportation, while reducing the number of people driving vehicles, also reduces congestion, improves air quality and helps people lead active, healthy lives. Making it easier to get around without a vehicle can also contribute to more inclusive communities by providing accessible and affordable ways to get from one place to another.

Government of Yukon rebates to encourage the purchase of electric bicycles for personal and business commuting began in 2020.

The YHCP e-bike initiative followed shortly thereafter thanks to the organisation's thought leaders with the first e-bike, Tweety, rolling into service June 15th, 2022. Sylvester came online April 13th, 2023 and was driven in part by both the government's commitment to active transportation and COVID-19.

Joel Drennan, Registered Nurse with the Yukon

Home Care Program, is an active user and supporter of the e-bike initiative. "Half way through the pandemic, there was a lot of burnout and mental and physical stress for colleagues and staff in general," claims Drennan. "Our organisation started looking at ways to promote both mental and physical health which included looking at government goals, one of which was fleet diversification."

With an eye to meeting organisational goals surrounding staff health and government goals of reduced emissions, the e-bike program was born, assisted by financial incentives for alternative forms of transportation and mobility.

Prior to project approval, the YHCP team had to submit a formal proposal to management and clearly articulate how the bikes would deliver benefits for the community, for the health care system and for individuals. Determined benefits include reduced reliance on fossil fuels to deliver YHCP programming and a concomitant reduction in GHG emissions, improved health of users, and an increase in the fun quotient for participating staff.

With the increased levels of burnout in the last few years Drennan say he in particular has been able to maintain positive mental health, increased productivity and a stronger commitment to remain working for YHCP.

I personally love the E-bikes! The white bike is light and easy to maneuver, while the yellow bike can accommodate carrying various equipment! I primarily use the bikes to visit clients to observe/lead their home exercise plans. The bikes are an efficient way to avoid the bottleneck traffic that comes in/out of the community."

Jack Lanigan, Interdisciplinary Team 1 Supervisor, Yukon Home Care Program



On a very positive note, Drennan says “Even staff who were not riding the bikes gave a tremendous amount of positive feedback on the initiative.”

The bike naming contest helped engage staff and served to increase the number of conversations around alternative forms of transportation and biking activities, which promoted health aspects of the e-bikes.

Perhaps the biggest concern was determining how a staff member was going to pack up all their equipment, do a home treatment, and return safely within an efficient timeframe.

The planning stage of the initiative also included determining how to make the jump from theory to practice; answering questions about how things would work on the ground and how the practice of home visits would actually play out.

The advocates researched studies that looked at speed, traffic conditions, and parking opportunities at client homes. From here they determined the optimal service distance was in the 10-15 km ranges and that an e-bike would be as fast if not faster than a motor vehicle. In fact, the e-bike proved faster in under five km commutes.

“I love riding the e-bikes. I mostly use them to do home visits. I have also picked up equipment with them. They keep me happy! Getting more sunlight, exercise, healthy role modelling (nurse on a bike ... getting exercise and doing a bit to save on fossil fuel use). It is also often faster to take the e-bike compared to driving a car downtown. Also fewer issues with parking and don't have to plug my own \$\$ into parking meters.”

Heather Johnson, Registered Nurse,
Yukon Home Care Program

These results helped support advocates in their claim they could get the job done faster than with a staff motor vehicle.

Health care organisations considering the adoption of a similar e-bike program are strongly encouraged to closely look at individual, environmental and facility benefits. Team members should look at e-bike adoption from several perspectives and at the myriad of ways the initiative might bring benefits.

Encouraging both like-minded and closed-minded people to engage in the process may help in revealing some previously unthought of factors that might just win over a few new supporters.

Further, open communications and promotion can help build capacity for the initiative. “Be prepared for things to start slowly,” says Drennan who adds, “Remember, you are initiating a corporate culture shift. It is going to take time.”

He further reminds us that the more micro-mobility devices there are on the road, the more bike lanes/trails will be made, and the safer these alternative modes of transportation will become. Advocacy will help make future initiatives easier and will make our communities safer, healthier and will reduce our overall carbon footprint.



Member of the YHCP Team taking a ride and transporting home care equipment on “Speedy Tweety” the e-cargo bike. Image courtesy of the YHCP.

Doing the Math – Initiative Logistics

The manufacturer's suggested list price for the first e-bike was \$6,000. A cost reduction resulted from participation in the Yukon government's rebate program and an additional discount was attributed to territorial health funding leaving a balance that was covered by the YHCP budget.

"We pulled in all possible incentives to make the program a reality," says Drennan who further reports, "Given the initial success of the initiative, we have begun budgeting to allow for the purchase of additional e-bikes." Drennan claims that if just one out of ten home visits were conducted by e-bike, the savings would outweigh the cost of the initiative.

His last words of advice: Be persistent, respectful and above all, make the process clear for senior leaders who may not have the time to heavily engage in the minute details of the proposed initiative. And most importantly, have fun!



Jim, a member of the YHCP Team, and Roscoe the bike dog taking a ride on "Speedy Tweety". Image courtesy of the YHCP.

References

Cover image courtesy of the Yukon Home Care Program.

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About Us

The Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care is Canada's premier green health care resource network and is leading the evolution of green in Canada's health sector as a national voice and catalyst for environmental change. Collaboratively, we strive to reduce health care's ecological impact from compassionate care delivery while providing a platform upon which to discuss and promote best practices, innovation, environmental responsibility and climate change resiliency.
www.greenhealthcare.ca

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