

TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

Province extending virtual care pilot in two Charlotte County hospitals

Teladoc service for emergency department patients in St. Stephen and Grand Manan will continue through June of next year: Horizon

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More than 2,200 patients at Grand Manan Hospital and the Charlotte County Hospital in St. Stephen have been seen virtually by physicians working with Teladoc Health Canada since June 2025, Horizon Health Network said last week in a release. Horizon said its partnership with Teladoc has been extended through June 30, 2027. Photo by ANDREW BATES/BRUNSWICK NEWS

Mayors in southwestern New Brunswick are welcoming a decision by Horizon Health Network to extend a pilot program that has connected more than 2,200 emergency patients in the area with a virtual care physician.

The health authority announced last week that it was extending its virtual emergency care partnership with Teladoc Health Canada at the Grand Manan Hospital and the Charlotte County Hospital in St. Stephen until at least June 30, 2027. The program, which began in 2024 and was set to end Sept. 30, includes a virtual physician three days a week and is intended to extend emergency department coverage and clinical capacity, according to a press release from Horizon.

As part of the program, when a patient arrives at the emergency department, they are triaged and, with consent, a credentialed emergency medicine physician working with Teladoc joins the patient, along with an on-site nurse, according to the press release.

The Village of Grand Manan had expressed support for the project when it was previously up for extension in November last year, and Mayor Bonnie Morse said this past Wednesday that “everybody was just elated and ecstatic that we are continuing this project” when the municipality was told in July it was being extended again.

“It’s been phenomenally successful here on the island, and we’re just really glad to see it continuing on,” Morse told Brunswick News.

In the press release, Horizon said that more than 2,200 patients had been seen by a virtual physician at both sites since June 2025, with 96 per cent of the patients seen virtually at Grand Manan Hospital fully treated by the virtual physician. Horizon said in the press release that this resulted in “significantly fewer patients” leaving the emergency department without being seen.

“I’m hearing from people that have had experience with Teladoc ... that they feel really re-assured by it,” Morse said. “People seem to really appreciate the help that they’re getting, they appreciate the follow-up they get from the Teladoc system.”

That cuts down on additional trips to the hospital, Morse said, especially in scenarios where someone comes with an issue like an infection that may have required a visit from the on-call doctor in the past or can get a prescription right away. Fifteen

ambulance transfers were facilitated by Teladoc physicians, according to the press release.

The service was initially provided in St. Stephen and Sussex, with the pilot ending in Sussex because it did not extend emergency service hours because there wasn't an on-call physician available, Health Minister John Dornan told reporters in June 2025.

According to the release, the technology is now used on evenings and overnights on Grand Manan and in the afternoon at Charlotte County Hospital, with Horizon spokesperson Kris McDavid saying the facilities' operating hours have remained unchanged.

"This pilot has shown us that virtual care, when used thoughtfully and as a complement to in-person coverage, can make a real difference in the lives of patients and the health-care teams who serve them," Greg Doiron, Horizon vice president of clinical operations, said in the press release.

Horizon said the extension will allow both companies "to continue refining the model, gathering data and exploring further opportunities" across New Brunswick, according to the release.

It said that the system has drawn "positive feedback from patients, physicians and staff," saying that physicians have reported improved work-life balance and department staff have highlighted gains in patient care quality, workflow efficiency and workplace morale. McDavid said those findings were "quantified by survey results."

The New Brunswick Medical Society, which represents the province's doctors, came out against the program in February last year, Brunswick News has reported. In a comment Thursday, president Dr. Carl Boucher said it's "not surprising that patients appreciate increased access to physicians," but there are "better and more efficient ways" to provide increased access to physicians, arguing that working with a private company like Teladoc comes at a premium to the taxpayer.

"While it is not surprising that patients appreciate increased access to physicians, the NBMS believes there are better and more efficient ways to provide this," Boucher said, adding that the society "is worried about the precedent the Horizon Health Network is setting by providing equal or more generous incentives for virtual care than in-person alternatives in our rural community emergency departments."

In the release, Teladoc Health Canada's managing director Joby McKenzie said they're "proud to continue partnering with Horizon," saying that "by working collaboratively with on-site teams, we expand clinical capacity, improve access, support staff well-being, and help strengthen the sustainability of the health-care system."

St. Stephen Mayor Steven Backman said Friday that the extension “is good, because the hospital has been very crowded of late, and I think it’s a good way to take off some of the pressure.”

According to Horizon statistics, total occupancy at the hospital has been over the “threshold” of 95 per cent for all but 29 days of 2026. McDavid said that at Charlotte County Hospital, about five per cent of patients were seen virtually in April 2026, as an indicator.

“The feedback I’ve gotten is that it’s getting more crowded and service times are increasing in the ER,” Backman told Brunswick News Friday.

Last Monday, Brunswick News reported that issues had been raised about overcrowding at hospitals in central and western New Brunswick, with Horizon responding that “nearly all of our hospitals are currently overcapacity, and that pressure impacts every area of the health-care system, including emergency departments,” according to Natalie King, director of patient flow, operations and ambulatory care.

In a comment provided to Brunswick News, King said that “improving patient flow and addressing the underlying factors that contribute to these chronic system-wide challenges remains a top organizational priority.”

Backman said overcrowding issues in St. Stephen come in part because “we just don’t have the facilities for the number of patients.”

“At some point I think we’ve got to look at increasing the size of the facilities if our aging population is going to continue trending upwards, which I think it is,” Backman said. “I think short-term, there’s some things they can do, which they’re trying to do, but long-term we really need a rational plan for infrastructure improvement,” which he said could include expanding the hospital or building more transitional beds for alternative level of care patients.

In December of last year, the province announced that the access clinic on the third floor of the Charlotte County Hospital would become a collaborative care clinic in a dedicated location, later revealed as the former Sobeys grocery store on King Street.

Initially targeted for early 2026, the clinic is now on a timeline to open in early 2027, according to an August update, McDavid said. Work is “progressing well” with demolition at the site complete, according to the update, including the removal of flooring, and permitting underway to begin the next stage of construction.

“I’m hoping that happens, because we need more doctors and we need more clinic space,” Backman said. “That’ll clear out a lot of space on the third floor of Charlotte

County Hospital ... so that would solve some of the space pressure, but I still think they should be looking to the future and looking at expanding that facility."

- *With files from Andrew Waugh, Barbara Simpson and Brice McVicar*