

High Tech Healthcare

SuperNet enables enhanced healthcare for the Siksika Nation

Tyler White, Chief Executive Officer for the Siksika Nation Health Services, has seen firsthand the difference the Alberta SuperNet can make in the health and well-being of a community.



Photo courtesy of
Siksika Nation Health & Wellness Centre

With a population of approximately 6,000, the Siksika Nation is located roughly 100 kilometres east of Calgary, Alberta. Since 1999, Tyler has held responsibility for the Nation's health services, which encompass a number of components including a community health program,

a medical clinic, community health representatives, an elder lodge, professional services, emergency services, and a community wellness program, to name just a few. The organization employs approximately 150 staff in various disciplines and was recently accredited by the Canadian Council on Health Services as an organization that meets national standards of quality.

Tyler, IT Administrator Larry White and the rest of the team developed plans to expand the health services available to the Siksika Nation with the goal of providing the highest quality of care possible. They soon realized that fast, stable connectivity was a critical element in delivering those services. Their existing

wireless connection through the main Siksika administration did not provide the security or stability they needed. Initiatives such as establishing a TeleHealth program, and implementing electronic medical records and digital X-ray storage demanded more. Subsequent discussions with Health Canada and Charter Telecom (a local network infrastructure company) pointed Tyler to Axia and the Alberta SuperNet as the only logical answer.

One of the first hurdles the Siksika Nation had to overcome was getting approval as a federal entity to connect to the Alberta SuperNet, a provincial asset. Axia worked closely with Health Canada and the Siksika Nation to help facilitate the approval process through the Government of Alberta.

Once that obstacle was cleared, the actual network construction got under way, with a physical fibre connection being made to a Meet-Me Centre approximately 1½ km from the Siksika site. Two Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) were put in place: one internal network at the Health and Wellness Centre with the features and capabilities typical of a secure corporate network; and a second connecting the Wellness Centre to Clinic Vault, an electronic medical records (EMR) application service provider.

During the planning, construction and commissioning stages, Tyler was very pleased with the working relationship between Axia and his team. Although initially the Axia team wasn't very familiar with Siksika and First Nations, Tyler says they were very helpful in terms of ensuring they knew exactly what was required and getting the network up and running. Axia also worked with Neil McGinnis of Charter Telecom during the actual construction phase to get SuperNet into the Health and Wellness Centre.

"I do a lot of work with Axia," Neil says, "working with Sales and Provisioning. They are very responsive and helpful."

Now that the infrastructure is built, operational and secure, the Siksika Nation is building additional VPNs within SuperNet to other application service providers. "Now that the physical connection is there, any number of logical connections can be built securely across the SuperNet," Tyler says. "It's one phenomenal service and the flexibility to customize a solution is definitely an advantage."

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New and innovative ways to use SuperNet to improve health services are constantly being evaluated. For example, home care nurses now carry hand-held devices allowing them to access client files and records at any time. The youth treatment centre is also being connected, a possibility that hadn't been envisioned at the beginning of the project. Satellite dialysis and expanded MRI capability are planned, as is completion of a youth solvent abuse treatment centre, one of only nine in Canada. According to Tyler, now that the infrastructure is in place, the Siksika Nation is in the enviable position where there is nothing they can't consider.

"Communications is critical, but especially for a health and wellness centre," says Tyler. "Without SuperNet, we would not be able to attract and retain quality doctors, dentists, radiologists and other healthcare professionals."

Axia is the manager and operator of the Alberta SuperNet.