

New AI-powered tools will help connect locals to trusted community resources

Village Media

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Village Media headquarters in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., is pictured in this file photo. | Jake Cormier/Village Media



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Village Media, the Ontario company that publishes this local news source, is [partnering with OpenAI](#) to create a suite of tools designed to give people easier, faster access to vital community resources and other important information.

The first project in development is “Open Door,” an AI-powered community health and care navigator built on a foundation of comprehensive, hyperlocal information. Set for an initial launch in Sault Ste. Marie, the tool will draw from a curated directory of more than 200 community organizations across 24 categories of support.

“Residents can privately and anonymously describe what they need in everyday language, such as emergency food assistance, health care, housing or a safe place to stay, and the tool will direct them to relevant local organizations,” reads a press release from Village Media, issued Wednesday.

Open Door users will “receive a personalized, step-by-step plan explaining which services may help, how they work together and what to expect at each stage,” the release continues, with the goal of “giving residents a clearer starting point and helping them reach the right support more quickly.”

Village Media developed Open Door through its Cares division, which leads community-support initiatives across the company’s local markets. Although OpenAI will provide technology and support, Village Media says it will remain “fully responsible for all editorial decisions.”

“Local journalism can and should be about more than reporting the news, it is about helping communities understand themselves and connecting people with the information they need,” said Jeff Elgie, CEO of Village Media. “Open Door builds on that mission. By combining our local knowledge and relationships with OpenAI’s technology, we can help residents navigate community services in a way that is simple, compassionate and practical.”

Village is trumpeting the new tool as the first step in a broader partnership that will bring the company’s trusted local journalism to ChatGPT and usher in the development of other AI-powered community resources.

“Local news organizations play an essential role in keeping communities informed and connected, and we believe they are worth investing in,” said Varun Shetty of OpenAI. “AI can help them run their operations and businesses more effectively and build useful new products like Open Door, which helps people find local services such as food, housing, health care, and safety support. It gives residents practical information when they need it most.”

Open Door will be available online and on mobile devices, with the potential to expand access through libraries, shelters, hospitals, community centres and food banks. The pilot project in Sault Ste. Marie will allow Village Media and participating organizations to understand how residents seek assistance, identify gaps in available information and improve connections between people and services before introducing the tool to other communities.

“User privacy is paramount,” the news release says. “OpenDoor medical and care queries will not be associated to an account or any other form of identity tracking.”

For people seeking support, the challenge is often not whether a service exists — but knowing where to find it, whether they qualify and how to take the next step.

“Sault Ste. Marie is proud to be the first community to pilot Open Door,” said Matthew Shoemaker, the city’s mayor. “We have many organizations doing vital work, but people do not always know where to begin when they need help. Making those resources easier to find will have a meaningful impact for our residents and strengthen the connections among the organizations serving our community.”

Village Media is a community impact organization that operates one of North America’s most successful digital-only local news networks, currently serving 27 communities and 1.5 million unique visitors per month. Its titles include [*The Trillium*](#), an award-winning political news source covering the Ontario legislature.

The company has built a sustainable model rooted in local reporting, community engagement, advertising, events and civic participation. Its mission is anchored on five distinct pillars:

- Inform residents through trusted, fact-based local journalism.
- Connect people through civil, community-centered spaces and events.
- Grow local economies by helping businesses reach and serve local audiences.
- Support local organizations, causes and neighbours through community-building initiatives.
- Empower residents by giving them better ways to understand issues, participate in civic life and help shape the future of their communities.

“We believe that Village Media’s mission to empower the communities it serves creates both the opportunity and the responsibility to thoughtfully execute that mission in an AI-enabled world,” said Richard Gingras, the chair of Village Media’s board. “We value OpenAI’s acknowledgement and support of our mission and our work.”

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