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Supporting Virtual Connections During Social-Distancing

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Supporting Virtual Connections During Social-Distancing

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Purpose

The Maine *Social Undistancing Committee* was established to promote full access by individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities (IDD) to the benefits of digital technology. These benefits include accessing life-enriching information; connecting with friends and family; working; participating in telehealth; finding others who share their interests; obtaining products and services; entertainment; and participating fully in the life of their communities.

Collaborators:

- Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies, University of Maine
- Maine Developmental Disabilities Council
- Boston University Doctoral Student in Occupational Therapy – Maggie Carter.

Activities

- Survey of adult providers on Internet usage among people with developmental disabilities.
- Maine Developmental Disabilities iPad Project made 148 iPads available to individuals with developmental disabilities.
- Technical Support for the use of iPads.
- Development of tutorials for Zoom, Facebook and other applications.
- Pilot projects with agencies to promote virtual connecting and to identify obstacles to Internet and social media usage among individuals with developmental disabilities.
- Survey of Direct Support Professional (DSP) on use of internet.

Resources Developed

- [How to Video Chat Using Facebook Messenger on iPad and Computer \(PDF\)](#)
- [How to Video Chat Using FaceTime on iPhone or iPad \(PDF\)](#)
- [How to Start a Zoom Meeting on an iPad](#)
- [How to Schedule a Zoom Meeting on iPad \(PDF\)](#)
- [How to Join a Zoom Meeting Using an iPad \(PDF\)](#)
- [How to Download the Zoom Cloud Meeting App on iPad \(PDF\)](#)
- [Being Polite on Zoom \(video\)](#)

Survey Results

- Most agencies reported that few of the people they serve access the Internet daily.
- Most do not have their own Internet account and access it through an agency account.
- Most who access the Internet do not have their own email addresses or access social media.
- Upwards of 75% of individuals with DD do not receive the level of support they need to access social media or the Internet.
- 42% of DSPs reported that 0-10% of the people they support use digital technology.
- All DSPs reported the people they support need some amount of assistance to access the internet.
- DSPs reported leisure and social communication as the main activities for which the people they support used digital technology.



Obstacles to Virtual Access

- Lack of devices (e.g., tablets, cell phones, or computers).
- Affordability of Internet access.
- Limited access to agency Internet account.
- Limited Internet access in rural areas.
- Lack of training and support for individuals.
- Lack of confidence or skill by professionals in use of technology.
- Perceptions that person whom they support lacks necessary cognitive or communication skills.
- Safety concerns (e.g., fear of exploitation, financial scams).
- Low priority for staff.

The iPad Project

- A collaborative effort supported by the Maine Developmental Disabilities Council to address the impact of pandemic related social isolation and enable 148 Mainers with developmental disabilities to increase their access to socialization, self-advocacy, employment, education and telehealth.
- We learned that the need is even greater than predicted, the digital divide is getting deeper and wider, and access to assistive technology is not working optimally.
- Most recipients did not require significant technical assistance to use the devices and some reported utilizing the off-the-shelf accessibility features.
- Most reported increased social connection, better access to services and supports. The statewide self advocacy organization indicated that the iPads increased member engagement.



Possible Next Steps

- PR campaign emphasizing need of individuals with IDD to access the Internet.
- Advocacy and Self-Advocacy for virtual access.
- Support incorporation of social media/Internet into PCP process.
- Technical training and support for direct support professionals.
- Provide teams with information on obtaining technology.
- Provide training to direct support professionals and those with developmental disabilities on using the Internet to make new connections and expand social networks; accessing technology more independently; specific apps such as Zoom and Messenger; safe use of the Internet; and Internet etiquette.