

HEALTH BRIEFS: GET CONNECTED REPORT

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CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AMONG LOW-INCOME SENIORS IN NEW YORK CITY

New report from Public Health Solutions demonstrates the capacity for low-income seniors to adopt new technology and gain significant quality of life improvements in ease of obtaining essential goods and services and connecting with friends and family.

KEY FINDINGS

The Get Connected project, a pilot program conducted by Public Health Solutions (PHS), found that access to technology and technological literacy can improve quality of life and access to resources among low-income seniors living in an under-resourced NYC community.

- After receiving a tablet and technology training, all seniors said they were “comfortable” navigating the tablet and two-thirds reported they were “very comfortable.” Moreover, 100% said that the tablet allowed them to do activities that they previously could not do.
- Access to a tablet helped seniors connect to health and social resources. The top two uses of the tablet included finding resources (“surfing”) on the internet (50%) and connecting with family and friends (42%).
- Quality of Life (QoL) increased 5% among the pilot project participants, as compared to the declines in QoL among non-participating seniors.

- Usage of and comfort with the technology was exceptionally high. 100% of seniors reported using their tablets weekly, with 42% reporting a daily use.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the digital divide among the most vulnerable segments of the population, particularly low-income older adults¹. This population faces barriers related to both age and income. In an age of digital connectivity, the consequences of not using the internet has significant implications for older adults’ health and well-being².

Recognizing the social, emotional, and physical tolls that this digital divide has brought seniors, PHS’ East Harlem Village Network (EHV) program launched the Get Connected pilot project. This project connected low-income seniors living in NYC Housing Authority (NYCHA) housing in East Harlem with tablets and internet connectivity, along with

1:1 virtual trainings (in English and Spanish), to help them safely stay connected with people outside their homes and access groceries, medicine, and interactive classes during the pandemic.

STUDY

The study was conducted between August 2021 and January 2022 among 49 low-income older adult (aged 60-89 years) residents of the East Harlem Village Housing Authority (NYCHA Housing). Primary languages among this group of residents included English (23), Spanish (22), and Chinese Mandarin (4).

Project participants were identified through a questionnaire provided over the phone. PHS partnered with Candoo Tech to provide the technology (tablets) and SelfHelp to support technical training for elderly adults. All tablet devices were pre-configured with participants' preferred languages and communication apps and a desktop shortcut to Virtual Senior Center services.

Each participant received a complete package including a tablet; unlimited wireless internet access for a year; printed resources; full access to SelfHelp's Virtual Senior Center, and technology training and support provided by Candoo Tech Concierge. Participants also received 1:1 training, unlimited support sessions with tech concierges, and six hour-long group classes with up to 10 participants each.

The project was evaluated through a pre- and post-Older Adult Quality of Life questionnaire; pre- and post-survey around technology access and the efficiency of training; a Virtual Senior Center utilization report; a Candoo Tech utilization report; and direct feedback from participants during check-in calls with the EHV Project Coordinator.

FINDINGS

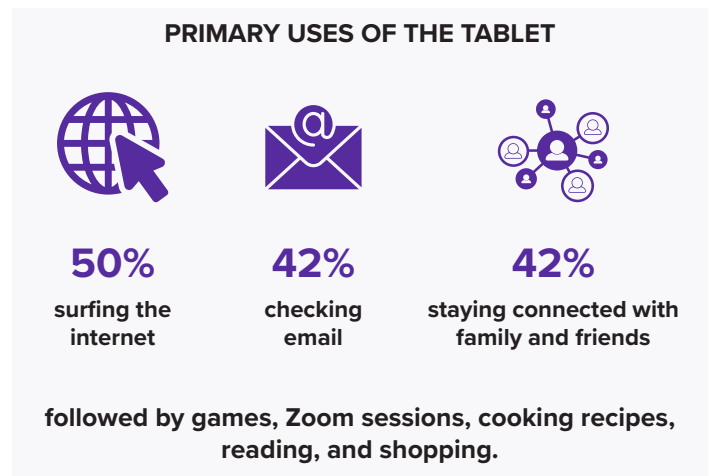
Participant Usage

During the first three months of the project, PHS discovered low utilization rates and conducted a root cause analysis. The analysis identified several challenges, including that the initiation of tech services fell on participants, many of whom lacked motivation to learn technology and were hesitant to express specific needs; the tech curriculum was too complicated for the population; and many participants struggled with font size and screen-time limitations.

PHS worked with partners to make all needed adjustments. By the end of the project, 71% of participants completed their 1:1 90-minute session, a 61% increase from 44% before the analysis.

Participant Satisfaction and Feedback

All participants reported feeling comfortable navigating the tablet, with 75% "very comfortable" and 25% "somewhat comfortable." Moreover, **100% of respondents reported that the tablet allows them to do activities that they previously could not do.** Post-evaluations revealed that 100% of respondents reported use of tablets weekly, with 42% reporting almost daily use.



All participants surveyed reported mid- to high-satisfaction with the 1:1 session (85.7% "very satisfied" and 14.3% "somewhat satisfied").

Quality of Life

PHS' Quality of Life (QoL) evaluation revealed a 5% increase in QoL among project participants, primarily in the areas of social/leisure activities and hobbies and getting pleasure from one's home.

The pre-pilot survey found 51% of respondents did not have consistent access to Wi-Fi in their home, and 61% did not have an email address, which significantly affected their access to people and resources. Preliminary data from the project helped alleviate the severe impact of the loss of social enrichment opportunities due to COVID-19.

“The hardest part of the training was learning how to set up the computer. **But once I was comfortable using the technology, there was no stopping me.** I love having company on the virtual senior center, seeing another person... it's like they're right there with me! **Having this opportunity has changed my life.**”

- Rachel Oddman, a senior helped by Get Connected

CONCLUSION

The Get Connected project was well received by participants and enabled seniors who had been isolated during the pandemic to connect with their families and communities and conduct activities that they previously could not do online.

The project found that seniors are more likely to be motivated to learn technology when 1) they see the benefit of using technology through a specific

activity they are interested in and enjoy; 2) the learning opportunities are spread out over time and include refresher materials; 3) their peers are involved in a group setting; and 4) in-person training is available at the start.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The total cost for the Get Connected project was \$48,500 – funding was generously provided by PHS' individual donors and the Robin Hood Foundation. The cost per participant was \$990, which included a tablet, internet service, and all trainings.

Extending benefits beyond the project's pilot group will require low-cost internet access, access to free tablet programs, and free or reduced-price training options. During the pandemic, broadband benefit programs were introduced for low-income communities and most recently the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) is available long term, providing an opportunity to maintain affordable internet access for participants.

PHS plans to integrate the Get Connected project into the organization's robust community resource network that provides a one-stop shop to a variety of social services to improve health among under resourced New Yorkers. By doing so, the project can expand across the city and PHS staff can ensure that low-income seniors receive a variety of social services – like housing, food, transportation, and mental health – above and beyond digital access from the Get Connected project.

¹ Sensmeier, 2020; Singh et al., 2020

² Holt-Lunstad, 2018; Shankar et al., 2017; Steinman et al., 2020

ABOUT PHS

Health disparities among New Yorkers are large, persistent and increasing. Public Health Solutions (PHS) exists to change that trajectory, and support vulnerable New Yorkers in achieving optimal health and building pathways to reach their potential. We improve health outcomes and help communities thrive by providing services directly to vulnerable low-income families, and supporting 200 community-based organizations through our long-standing public-private partnerships. We focus on a wide range of public health issues including food and nutrition, health insurance, maternal and child health, sexual and reproductive health, tobacco control, and HIV/AIDS. Your support helps us to realize our vision for health equity in New York City. Visit healthsolutions.org to learn more.