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Senior Center Response to COVID-19: Technology

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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the use of technology critical to remain socially connected with others while remaining physically distance. Senior centers in Massachusetts have had to think outside of the box and adapt their programs and services to be provided remotely, by phone, email, social media, and video calls. Moreover, senior centers have become responsible for helping older adults overcome their hesitations with using technology to keep them engaged and connected while physical gathering spaces have been closed.

Highlights

➢ By November 2020, at least half of COAs were providing some programs or services remotely.

➢ 38% of COA directors recognized technological challenges of the COA as a barrier to providing for the community.

➢ Less than a third of COAs were providing tech assistance to older adults in August 2020. That figure increased to 38% by November 2020.

➢ Critical services—application assistance and information and referral—were provided remotely by over two thirds of COAs in November 2020.

➢ COAs worked to improve the technology available to older adults, using a variety of methods to keep older adults connected through remote programming and other services.

88% of COAs reported that they did not facilitate any programs virtually (e.g., by phone or Internet) prior to the pandemic

Table 1. Programs offered remotely	August 2020	November 2020
Remote Classes (e.g., fitness classes)[1]	68%	61%
Remote Education Classes (e.g., topical presentations)	43%	51%
Remote Social Groups	44%	43%
Application Assistance (taxes, SHINE)	*	68%
Remote Information and Referral	*	79%
Mental Health Counseling	*	28%

1 This slight decline between surveys is a result of measurement differences
* This was not a response option on the August survey

Table 2. Challenges related to Technology	August 2020	November 2020
Most Difficult Challenges Faced		
Lack of or difficulty with technology at the COA/senior center	38%	38%
Efforts to Address Challenges Faced		
Increased remote programming (e.g., Zoom, Facebook Live, etc.)	60%	66%
Increased technological capabilities at COA/Senior Center	33%	37%
Began providing tech support to seniors	29%	38%
Increased COA/senior center presence on Cable Access television	46%	53%

Senior Centers used technology to keep their constituents connected

Technology Assistance

- "**Received a grant to purchase tablets** to allow us to do virtual programming; purchased Vigorous Mind program which will assist us with virtual programming, especially to those with cognitive issues"
- "We are hosting "Learn to Zoom" classes to help **bridge the technology gap**"

Live Streaming (e.g., Zoom, Facebook Live, etc.) and Cable Access TV

- "[We use] **live facebook** three times per week
- "We are working closely with our local cable access station to provide **progamming for those without internet access or tech abilities**"

Remote classes and activities

- "[We] provide **10 fitness/exercise zoom classes** [and] Bocce 4 days a week"
- "**Teleconferencing calls** for activities, e.g., Book Club, Bingo and Zoom gatherings for Caregivers and their loved ones"

Remote Social Groups

- "We are attempting to setup a conference call **phone-in option for socialization,** we also recently heard about a local senior center doing a "Buddy Check System"

Remote Mental Health Counceling

- "offer people to have private space at COA to have ZOOM sessions with a counselor. **COA has coordinated with local mental health counseling service** to provide such accommodation"

As a part of the MCOA Database project, three surveys were conducted with all Councils on Aging (COAs) in Massachusetts to collect data about the organization, operations, and programs and services provided locally through COAs. Surveys were distributed in May 2020, August 2020, and November 2020. Each survey included a section of questions addressing current response to COVID-19.

This fact sheet includes data highlights from 280 COAs that responded to both the second and third surveys (82% of all COAs). About 6 months into the pandemic, COAs were still operating and adapting to different methods of program and service provision to meet the social and mental health needs of their constituents.

To learn more about the MCOA Database and its contents, please contact us at CSDRA@umb.edu

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