

Promising Practices, 2020 ConnectHomeUSA Digital Series Promising Digital Inclusion Practices in the Time of COVID-19, 10/5/20

Bobby Coulter: So a little bit about Fresno with this slide. I'm a data geek, so you're going to see a few data slides in here. But a lot of people maybe aren't familiar with the size of Fresno housing and maybe our scope.

And so just for a little reference, the Fresno Unified School District, which is the school district we work with most, is actually the fourth largest in California. And we estimate, you know, roughly 70 to 80 percent of our kids go to Fresno Unified School District.

So I wanted to bring that up because it's a big number. There's a lot of children living in our apartments. But when you see the tech camp numbers, it's relatively small. This is on purpose. So this is a way that we found that some of our more popular and sustainable programs are the ones where we engage with smaller groups for a longer period of time.

So a lot of the times, you'll see the same families, different age groups from the same families attending the tech camp. And we found that's because we were able to keep cost minimal and, you know, consistency in methods, consistency in names, consistency in partners so that, you know, when a child or younger sister or brother is too young to go to the camp, it's still around so that they get to go to it, you know, the camp they heard their brother or sister talk about five years later. Right, we now just finished our fifth year of this when a lot of the programs or very few of the programs that we have with the Housing Authority have lasted this long. Next slide please.

So as I mentioned, I'm absolutely a data geek. And so this slide is my favorite. We get the survey information back. We do a pre and post survey. And as soon as we get it back, this is where I spend my time. We do it not just for our own reporting purposes, but it also serves as a good outreach tool when looking for new funding. You know, being able to show that our tech camp is almost 80 percent female or who have identified as female shows that our program is really making a difference in one of the more under-represented groups in technology.

We also track attendance, you know, mainly so that the kids have a little skin in the game. We tell them that they have to have at least 80 percent attendance to keep the laptop and the computer kits or anything they use in the class. I'll have to, you know, obviously explain how we modified our attendance because that just wasn't possible before. Or sorry; it wasn't possible in the COVID time.

So another (equipment ?) as an agency that we've made is to add demographic information to every single dashboard that we put out or track internally. We track a lot of our program participation this way with the goal of, you know, all of our programming matching the residents and being representative of the residents that live in Fresno housing.

So, as you can see, we still have some work to do with this one. Seventy percent, just for your reference, 70 percent of Fresno housing residents identify as [inaudible], 16 percent identify as black, 7 percent identify as white, and 6 percent identify as Asian. And so some of this, it helps drive our outreach efforts. You know, is there certain parts of the city or the county that we need to reach out to. I take this information and pass it on to our resident's empowerment group, and then they turn that into actions in outreach. Next slide please.

So as I mentioned, historically we kept the program relatively the same with some minor tweaks based on lessons learned, the survey results and feedback from the students and teachers that we collected at the end. For instance, years one through three, the camp was two weeks long, but we expanded it in year four when we added video editing when students expressed interest in becoming content creators and sharing and starting their own YouTube channels. So then that, you know, we went looking for someone that can help put together some curriculum around, you know, video production, storytelling. You know, the camp has evolved based on the feedback from the students.

Typically there's around 20 students, 2 teachers, a teacher's aide that's a previous graduate of the program. The two teachers, they are not volunteers. We pay them. They are actually teachers that work for local tech incubator but also subcontract with the school district. So they're all verified. They have curriculum ready to go.

I bring this up because we found that, you know, having a volunteer who likes technology is great and we'll take them all day, but it isn't quite enough for us just because we need someone who has the fundamental skills of managing a classroom, especially since not all of the students have the same level experience with the technology.

So there's different techniques they have around, you know, not alienating a whole group because they're a little behind or a little ahead. Those are things that are taught and learned as normal teachers would be. And some of our volunteers, they've struggled with that. Students learn basic coding, some electronics, block coding, safe Internet practices, storytelling, video production, and then the goal is to have a final product at the end that they can share in a showcase. Next slide please.

As I mentioned, there's usually two to three weeks of in-person training. And this is all the pre-March 12th model. Class was held at a local technology hub that has about I think 150 different companies inside of its building. So walking around the hallways, we made it a point where the kids would eat lunch in -- they have a restaurant on site -- eat lunch there, get drinks but yet have badges on and we can walk through the halls and get into some of the same buildings just so they feel like they're part of that community instead of, like I mentioned before, having them at a computer lab within one of our properties where they're segregated from the actual experience of all the cool things that I enjoy when I walk through that tech hub.

We also try to do at least four to five different field trips. Field trips would include local universities, tech companies, tech mentorship programs. They aren't always 100 percent technology related. Some of them have been like in fashion design or something where it's not always obvious that this is someone that would use technology, so some graphic design.

Once again, we're just trying to introduce the students to as many local resources as possible. Each partner when we start talking to them about being a stop on the field trip, it's more of, okay, this is going to be a long-term partnership with these kids, not necessarily with these students, not necessarily with the housing authority. So they're all encouraged to exchange information, talk about any mentorship programs, anything that--the tech camp is only two to three weeks. So anything that can happen after that. We got them for the two to three weeks, and then afterwards who can they call if they're interested in robotics or a Maker Space.

So in addition to getting the laptop and robotics kits, we also provide meals and transportation. We want to make sure that every student has all of the tools they need to be successful. Some of these kids are coming from about an hour away. And so they have to wake up at 6:30 in the morning, get on the van, the shuttle van that we rent and get over there. So sometimes you might not have time for breakfast. So we feed them as soon as they get there. The teachers really appreciate that.

At the end, there's a big showcase for the family and friends. And so looking at the list, I think 99 percent of these items were actually considered a health and safety risk after March 13th. So we had to adapt pretty radically. Next slide please.

So the first thing is hardware. Our hardware, previous to this, we had computer kits that they would put together. But the priority was set to ready-to-go programming where communication was easy and straightforward. So we needed a computer that they could turn on and we could instantly be communicating with them. So we chose iPads. Familiarity with the interface, familiarity with the peripherals and some, you know, how long the batteries last, all those kind of things factored into why we chose, in addition to -- you know, troubleshooting is done through the device. Not all students had a phone available to them during class. So we had to be able to troubleshoot the device.

So the device itself had to have as little moving parts and components as possible so that troubleshooting was about does it have Internet connection and is it charged, not necessarily dealing with video cards or keyboards or anything. We also had to take into account what was easy to deliver as our resident empowerment group had much less time to go out, and they weren't allowed in the field due to safety concerns.

So in addition to the iPads, every single iPad came with one year of data without any restrictions. So after the class, we showed them how to turn that into a hot spot for Internet because some of the funding saved from transportation and having to rent space, we could use in other ways. So we used it for providing Internet. In addition to that, we learned pretty quickly that headphones are an absolute must. As you know, during shelter-in-place, everyone is home and you can't really expect the entire household to tiptoe around when class is in session. And so we purchased headphones for all the students. And we had to buy a couple extra because things get broken in two weeks. Next slide please.

So all the software had to be app-based since we're using iPads. It wasn't too much of a change except for a lot of the video editing software. But the biggest thing was really our way of

communicating in video conferencing. So every e-mail account had to be set up ahead of time. The actual app we were going to use had to be set up ahead of time. We distributed all of the e-mail addresses to the teachers so that they didn't need to track someone down by -- we created the accounts ourselves. So we didn't have to rely on mom having access to the e-mail account and then passing the information on. We also put stickers on the back of each iPad that said here is your e-mail address.

The passwords we shared amongst the teachers and then showed the students how to change that because one of the issues we ran into was that a student would get locked out. So we needed to be able to change on our end or log into their account on our end to help troubleshoot because we had to keep that line of connection open and that line of communication open between us and the students at all cost. We couldn't go to their house or look over their shoulder to help them. So we had to make sure that there was multiple ways to communicate.

In addition, we worked with the schools in the past about ensuring that our curriculum matched theirs. And so this year, we worked with the school district to find out what video conferencing tools they were using. So Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet were the top three. And so we taught kids how to use that, how to get into a meeting, how to mute themselves, how to use their camera. Next slide please.

So the delivery I think was probably the most radically changed. Before, obviously, in person, like I said, you can look over someone's shoulder when they're having an issue. There was just things that you can do and luxuries that you had in place because you're standing next to the kids. So this year, we didn't have that.

So we tried to replace the consistent spot or physical location that you went to with a Web location. So we created a GitHub repository that included the agenda, teacher's contact information, link to today's Google Meet, the recordings, any reference materials so that kids didn't have to go and look for here's how I log into the class every day. Every single thing they would get to was on fresnosummertechcamp.com.

We also found that this year was much more difficult to work around everyone's schedule since we didn't have a captive audience, and we still had to keep our attendance records. So we actually set up two sessions, a morning instructional session and an afternoon peer coding session where in the afternoon, there was no real planned instruction, but everyone could stay on the Google Meet and as questions arose, they could ask the teacher on real time. We also marked someone as present as long as they attended each of the sessions, not even the entire session, just made it to either of the sessions.

Like I said before, each session was recorded and posted immediately to the GitHub repository so that if anyone missed class or was a little late, they could catch up. This also helps us with some of our students that had jobs and had to go to work during the day but didn't want to miss out. We still had some projects being turned in at 11:00 PM at night. And so we needed this 24-hour resource that we -- you know, this is something I think we're going to keep even after because there always was an interest. We just didn't have a way to fulfill interest in learning when a tech camp is over.

And this is also where it helped having a video editor teacher on staff. They were able to take the recording, process it, and post it within an hour of the class being over, even sometimes shorter. Next slide please.

So in lieu of an in-person and showcase event, we did a Facebook Live event where each student could share their project. This was a two-hour event. And this is another thing I think we're going to keep post-COVID as it really solved a lot of our transportation and timing issues that caused family and friends to miss an important event in their child's life. In the past, we would always provide another shuttle van to go around and pick up anyone that wanted -- any of the parents that wanted to participate. But it was highly reliant on you being at a certain place at a certain time, where the Facebook event, you didn't have to. They could do it from their phone. They could do it from anywhere. So I think that's another one that's going to stick around post-COVID.

And it hasn't yet been updated to reflect our COVID changes, but one of the other equipment that we've made in the past is to create a Summer Tech Camp Playbook on our website. So that's the one at the very bottom there that shows start to finish the innerworkings of a tech camp. So if you wanted to start your own to know how much money does it cost to support 20 students, where do we spend our money, who do we get money from, all of those things are in there in that. And it will soon be updated to include some of these COVID changes that we plan to keep post. Next slide, please.

Oh, another favorite one is, you know, we get great feedback around students that have come out of their shells really found an interest. And so here's what one of the parents -- the survey has a spot for resident feedback. So here's what one of the parents sent us. So that's it. I'm happy for the Q&A session at the end. But thank you all.

Mikayla Miller: Thanks, Bobby. Sounds like you have great things going on at Fresno Housing. Dana, did you want to introduce the next speaker?

M2: I think we can just go straight pass the ball to Stephanie.

Mikayla Miller: Okay. Thanks. Stephanie from San Buenaventura, you can get started.

Stephanie Spampanato: Okay. Hello, good morning, good afternoon, good evening, wherever you are. Bobby, you're a hard act to follow. So my name is Stephanie Spampanato. I'm the Community Services Manager for the Housing Authority of the City of San Buenaventura. Some of you may call Community Service, Residents Services where you are. So I'm just coming up on eight years with the agency. I'm very fortunate to work with a hugely talented team. There are seven of us. We have two residents service coordinators, one family self-sufficiency coordinator, one resident opportunity self-sufficiency coordinator, one case manager, and one AmeriCorps VISTA, who is actually one of our residents also. Her job is to work dedicated to the digital inclusion initiative.

My presentation today is going to concentrate on making the transition to virtual setting as it relates to our senior residents. And you'll notice I say in-person to virtual, not just programming because it doesn't just affect our work with residents. It affects all of us in just about everything we do now. So I'll be exploring our journey, and I'm sure it will resonate with many of you. But our hope is that there will be something in here for you to replicate or add to your journey or simply afford you the opportunity to reflect on your journey and how we all got where we are today. Can I have the next slide please?

So a little bit about us. We're in southern California, Ventura. We're a relatively small housing authority. And around 60 percent of our residents are senior and/or disabled. We have about 16 residential properties across the city of Ventura. And our Housing Choice Bachelor Program manages about 1500 [inaudible]. Can I have the next slide, please?

So most of us, if not all of us, were on some path to connectivity or digital intrusion in some form or another. And what this pandemic has done is change the way we interact with our residents, our partners, even our colleagues and our internal departments. We've had to fast-forward. And what we planned or what we could plan another time is now at the forefront and [inaudible] priority.

So we've gone from having that luxury to take 6 to 10 months to plan something, procure it, implement to having all these digital and virtual needs addressed yesterday. And some of our seniors have had quite the communications journey. Some are pretty savvy when it comes to technology. And others are starting from scratch.

So when COVID hit and we had the stay-at-home order, the first step response to services closing their doors or changing the way they provided their programs, we jumped into action and started calling residents every week.

So the first priority was immediate wellness, food security, just meeting their needs, making sure they were identified and sharing resources and connecting and referring our seniors to those resources. Food security was huge. And team community services got on that ball, and we procured just over 10,000 pounds worth of produce, fresh fruits, vegetables, canned, dry foods. And we delivered them door-to-door. And then, obviously, our partners kicked in with home delivered meal services, etc. and groceries. So we connected them.

And just as a matter of interest, the team over the last six months have made just shy of 8000 calls, and that's taken almost 2000 hours. Also of interest, we're finding that we're more connected now than we've ever been with our residents. And that's because of the weekly calls and the relationships that've been built during those calls. So [inaudible] we have their attention.

So the team identifies a need to undertake a survey, and they came up with a five-question survey, which was to assess access to understanding of and preferences relating to the digital platforms. And we all knew the end goal, everyone connected with a device, having skills and to use those platforms. So our rationale was to see where we were and what would it look like to get to our end goal if we could indeed get there.

So from that little July survey, around half, 56 percent of the seniors reported having some [inaudible] and more connected. And around 30 percent preferred online program because they were now at home and comfortable and felt safer in their own homes as opposed to going out and meeting with people. And about 58 percent said they prefer socially distanced in-person programming. And so the team started introducing practice sessions.

So we started with our resident advisory council across the city. And so they had these practice group calls. So it's kind of like trying to learn how to do a round robin and not all talk at the same time. Then we moved onto the online meeting platforms, and we used Zoom initially. So and that led onto in July public health putting on their first pilot program, a nutrition program. And that happened over the phone, which was pretty well received by the seniors because they didn't know each other. So that was another social connection for them as well.

Some of the challenges -- well, the first challenge really was that we weren't sure what we were doing, how we were going to do it. And our partner agencies [inaudible] public health, senior concerns, senior agency, they weren't sure how they were going to do it either, how they were going to transition online programming. And then, of course, there's the poor connectivity or no connectivity. Wi-Fi in some of our buildings are just in [inaudible]. We have been able to address some of that with some hotspots in one property, but we've still got a ways to go with that.

And some, setting up an e-mail account -- we now have been able to collect and log hundreds of e-mails [inaudible]. Some people are very comfortable joining a Zoom meeting or a GoTo or Team. Others don't [inaudible] or they're not sure how to turn it on. And it takes practice. I've been in a meeting where I've seen just people's ears.

But their presence are there, so it worked. I mean, there's all those questions, how to raise your hand, ask or submit a question, where's the mute button. I mean, I think we've all probably experienced that even in our own workplaces. There's always the one person who forgets to put themselves on mute, and then they're typing away and it sounds like a herd of elephants coming through.

So the educational component is huge. We can put in all the virtual programs we want. But if the connectivity isn't there, if there's no device or you don't know how to use it or you're not familiar with navigating online, then we set ourselves and our residents up to be pretty frustrated, and we'll lose them. And all those outreach efforts, outreach and [inaudible] efforts, they wouldn't bear any fruit at all, which would be quite tragic. Could I have maybe the next slide?

So we're now starting to roll out multiple online programs. And the way we're advertising this for the residents is still in those calls, those one-on-one calls to the residents. We've done the occasional mailout. We put a lot on Facebook, and we've actually put in digital bulletin boards alongside the physical pin bulletin board that we have at the property.

So there's a TV and we can stream programs. We can highlight programs. We can put all our flyers up there. So that's very useful. But we don't want to encourage [inaudible] we don't want to encourage people gathering and watching that digital bulletin board all together.

So some of the programs remain targeted to certain properties, but the one benefit of [inaudible] is they can get into all of our residents, which we're finding quite exciting. Although there are some capacity limits sometimes, but we certainly aren't at that point of having to worry about that yet.

The biggest challenge, like I said, remains the educational component. And to that end, we are actually working with everyone on -- thank you, Marybelle -- to put on a series of digital literacy skills workshop. And we're about to start a comprehensive needs assessment, and we have a launch date to start programming of October the 26th.

Some of those things that could be included are basic Internet searches, how to set up your e-mail, send an e-mail, respond, attach something and online safety, maybe online banking and shopping, how to watch or download a piece of music or maybe a documentary or a film, and just really understand the Internet's virtues and what different websites are and what types of websites there are.

So we have some of the programs down, as you can see. And we're well-connected with our resident communities. The county of Ventura still has operational restrictions under the four color code zones of operation like yellow, minimal, orange, moderate, red, substantial, purple, widespread. We happen to be in purple. We happen to be in the zone one. So many things still remain closed. So we just need to keep plugging away with our plans to be virtual for now.

One of those things that is upmost in our minds is how to hold a holiday event at the end of the year without gathering. And the question without an answer at the moment is how do we have our senior residents connect over the holidays. We've received many reports of loneliness, and the holidays can oftentimes exacerbate those feelings, as we all know.

So the calls are really important as are the programs to continue some form of normality because we won't be [inaudible] or serving our residents this year, but we want to do something. We don't have that down yet. Kind of off track from programming, but we do have a pickup truck and the team and I were thinking about maybe decking that up and dressing up in our holiday gear like we usually do and just going around proxy to proxy, blasting some music and singing a bit and trying to cheer everyone up. So with that sort, I'm actually going to end there. If anyone has any ideas about end-of-year events for residents, please get in touch and let's be innovative together. Thank you.

Mikayla Miller: Thanks. Thanks, Stephanie. If anyone else has any questions for Stephanie, please feel free to drop them in the Q&A box. And we have two more presenters going, so we'll just go ahead and move right along so we can have time for our Q&A. We already have a few questions coming in. So Jessica, are you ready to present?

Jessica: I am. Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone. So I'm going to start by talking a little bit about how we view digital practices for isolation intervention during times of social distancing. And I think it's really important to highlight that one of our main objectives for digital practices and becoming a partner in ConnectHome was really to lessen isolation. We have about 85

percent seniors and that's really one of our main goals. So during time of social distancing, it really kind of shifted our work so that it was all focused around digital practices.

So prior to the pandemic -- could we go back a slide? So prior to the pandemic, we secured partnerships meeting the three pillars, which was Internet access, devices, and education. From there we held our first convening, and it had all of our partners present. And shortly after that, we secured a contract with Starry, an ISP provider. And thereafter, they set up the infrastructure in both of our buildings so that residents could access Internet through them.

And then, you know, we pivoted as the pandemic started. We kind of shifted our focus. So we really put a heavy emphasis on ISP correspondence, so making sure that we got flyers out, making sure that we made every resident aware of their Internet options, and also making sure that they knew how to get connected. And Starry really did a wonderful job of doing that step-by-step. And lastly, we did secure a grant for devices, which were the Echo Dots. Next slide please.

So our three main partners -- well, our four main partners were Starry, AARP Connected Communities, and they provided the Echo Dots and also PCs for people who offered devices for residents at a low cost. And then we also wanted to make sure that residents had the education surrounding the Internet and their devices. So we did start a partnership with OATS, and they are the Older Adult Technology Services. So that was right before the pandemic started that we kind of had all these partnerships underway.

So we had our first convening on January 22nd, and we had all of our community partners in attendance. And at the convening, we outlined our partnerships and what our end goal was or what our vision was. And we also received ideas from stakeholders and sponsors on one of our really big goals, and that was to create mini libraries at both of our properties.

And I do want to kind of talk about the data around the need for Internet access with our residents. So we had 204 residents, and after our initial needs assessment, we found that 59 percent of the residents at one of our properties responded that they would like education around Internet access and technology, and 65 percent at our other property. So we really, really noticed that there was a need for it, and that was our initial segue into ConnectHome.

After we administered our Internet needs assessment, we had the highest return rate for anything that we've offered. So 62 percent of residents, they completed their survey at one of our properties and then 67 percent at the other. And both of these numbers far exceed our return rates for any kind of survey we've administered. And of these, 32 percent indicated that they had Internet connection at one property and 44 percent at the other.

So once the pandemic started, we did completely pivot our programming. And the first way we did that was we transitioned from having in-person programming where we had a calendar that was distributed to every resident to instead administering a newsletter that kind of highlighted ways that they could stay connected and if they were having feelings of loneliness where to go and then also putting that heavy emphasis on connection and their Internet options.

We also wanted to make sure that they knew that there were safe installation guidelines. So Starry really did a great job at making sure that residents were aware that they were following CDC guidelines, and they were practicing safe installation. And they also had a hotline where they could -- they were ready to help at all times. So that really helped residents in feeling secure and moving forward with Internet access.

Another way that we kind of shifted -- we could go back to the last slide -- was staff availability. So despite schedule changes during the pandemic, we did make sure that staff was available at all times. The housing authority provided a work cell phone for myself so that any time a resident would need something, even if it was a day that I was not in the office, that they still had access.

And then also we kind of shifted our focus from having residents working on a more community level to working more individually with residents. So prior to the pandemic, we would have a calendar that highlighted all the events we had going on, all the programming. Since the pandemic, we really worked at individually reaching out to residents and helping them through any issues that they had. And that's through staff availability.

So for our Internet service provider, we worked with Starry pretty closely. And what made it really successful is that, again, they worked really hard at making sure residents knew they were being safe with their installation process. Another way was they provided free Internet for the first two months, so it kind of added that extra layer of enticement. They had correspondence, constant flyers that were distributed to residents that clearly outlined how they could get Internet access. Having them be readily available also really helped.

And then also emphasizing that this was their means of isolation intervention during a time where they really couldn't leave their apartments being an at-risk demographic. So it really serves as their only way to stay connected, and emphasizing on that really pushed the effort.

So for devices, we received a grant through Connected Communities with AARP, and it was for the Echo Dot devices. And what worked with them was they were really flexible as well. So they created a remote training curriculum, and they worked with each property individually on what was the best model. So the in-person training that was part of their model to begin with, they turned into an online virtual training curriculum and that staff could undergo. So it was the trainer model.

The other important thing was that the Echo Dots kind of served as a way for residents to stay connected while they were social distancing. So they could get talk radio. They could get news, jokes, music. It could wake them up in the morning. And additionally, it did have health outcomes as appointment reminders and medication reminders.

So throughout this, what really worked and what really helped us is partner flexibility. So partners that have adjusted to the times and are able to still deliver services in a safe way and, again, kind of pivoted their programming as we have, that's really helped. Having staff flexibility as well, making ourselves available, so even days when we're not in the office, they still can get in contact with us if they do need any help.

And also consistency between partners and staff, making sure that we are always available even though we may not be able to meet in person or we may not be in office. And I think the same goes for partners. Our partners have been consistent throughout this whole pandemic, and that's really spoke to the residents.

And also having straightforward correspondence, so making sure that it's consistent, that we're constantly getting correspondence out about the programs that are available, how to get in touch with us and also making sure that it's straightforward to the point so residents don't have to go through any loopholes to get access to these programs.

So our future directions, what I found is at OATS, although they can't provide the in-person training that they were going to do before the pandemic, they do have a full curriculum online. So they have videos that show how to work a Zoom meeting. They have Zoom meetings that actually are kind of like focus groups for participants so that they can, one, have some isolation intervention means by connecting with others through Zoom and also get that support for whatever their device is or whatever questions around technology that they have.

And OATS was formerly only for certain areas where it was offered. Now that the pandemic has hit, it's available to anyone. So I do have links for those resources as well. We intend on doing a Zoom Echo Dot focus group for individuals who have received the Dot so that they can speak with other residents through Zoom and kind of troubleshoot any issues that they've had.

Our partnership with Starry, they are working on a playbook for digital literacy, Internet basics that's aimed towards seniors so it'll, again, go step-by-step through anything Internet related that they would need some assistance with. And then we would eventually like to have residents access their devices on a larger scale, so tablets, computers and smart devices, and we do intend on working with PCs for People for that.

So that's all I've got. And if anyone does have any questions, please feel free to send them my way.

Mikayla Miller: Thanks, Jessica. Thanks. That sounds great. A lot of your partners actually will be Starry and PCs for People will be joining us for tomorrow's session. So any of the attendees, be sure to join tomorrow if you want to hear more about that and also drop in questions for Jessy or Bobby or any of the other panel list.

Next up, last but not least, we have Megan Conkle from Akron Housing Authority.

Megan Conkle: Hi, everybody. So my name is Megan. Like Mikayla said, I'm from Akron, Ohio. Before I get into some of the things that we've been doing since COVID hit, I did want to give a little background about the housing authority.

So at AMHA, we serve over 25,000 residents in all of our housing programs including public housing, Housing Choice Voucher, and our local housing authority. So we have a pretty big footprint in northeast Ohio. And then we also have a nonprofit subsidiary called Building for

Tomorrow. And the primary purpose of our nonprofit is to support our resident services department and all of our resident services programming.

So somebody in the questions was asking a little bit about funding, and that has been a big way that we've been able to get around some of the tricky funding. At the beginning of COVID, we actually opened a specific COVID-19 action fund, which was originally for things like rental assistance or utility assistance. But we ended up being able to use and we continue to use some of that to subsidize devices and to do other connectivity things as well.

And with that being said, we've been a ConnectHome community since 2017. So pre-COVID, we already had our ConnectHome initiative kind of [inaudible]. And the three things that I think will be important to keep in mind as I go through my presentation is that we already had an ongoing [inaudible] hotspot lending program. So our residents were able to borrow very low data hotspots through the housing authority at no cost. We had also already had ongoing partnerships with PCs for People. In 2019, we distributed over 100 devices throughout our residents. So that was already in place.

And then in February right before everything kind of blew up, we had just finished wiring either the community rooms or common spaces for free Wi-Fi in 19 of our properties. I mean, that's kind of a moot point because all of those community rooms and common spaces ended up being shut down due to COVID. So that was a huge help for us, but it's helping us now as we move forward.

All right. So you can go to the next slide, and we can get into some of our programming. So AMHA has a really robust early childhood program. It's designed to be in home. Our parent partners and our staff actually go into our residences, works with families one-on-one and is able to get them ready for kindergarten. So obviously that became a big problem, and this is one of our sort of foundational programs. It's a huge deal for us. So we obviously had to find a way to make this work.

We had all 10 of our early childhood staff had to transition to virtual home visits. So as you can see in the picture, this is an actual screen grab with the proper allowances from the family. But so she's actually working on -- I don't know exactly which program that they're using here -- but working with one of our parent partners to continue the program to completion.

So the first thing that we had to do to make this happen is to make sure that families had the technology assistance they needed. So if they needed one of those free hotspots that we had in our lending program, we were able to get those to them. We helped them to expedite that application process and make sure that they had it at the very beginning. I know we also started sending our hotspots through the mail, and that was through tenant participation funds, so being able to distribute them throughout the pandemic despite not having people come into our actual building, into our office.

So we got them connected to the technology. And then we connected with them either via Google Hangouts, Zoom, Facetime. Essentially anything -- any platform where they were comfortable, we met them where they were. And that's going to be an ongoing theme from my

presentation, meet them where they are, find out what they have, and then figure out how to make it even, figure out how to create that equity on their ground as opposed to assuming that everyone has either the same access or the same barriers.

So the steps. We called all of the families that were participating in our home education programs, we offered them hotspots; and then we distributed "goody bags," which were essentially if you had any other children attending virtual school, we may have to go pick up a packet of some sort at the actual physical brick and mortar school. And that is the same for us. All their materials or their playdoh or their books went directly to their front door so that there were no transportation issues for picking those up.

And -- oh, can you go back? Sorry. One of the things that we thought is that this would create a drop-off in our participation. And it did, but by August, 61 percent of our Parents as Teachers, which is one of the home visitation programs, and 78 percent of the other home visitation program were participating virtually. So that was a huge win for us.

The other ones we are working right now on figuring out why they dropped off. It's possible it's just not as convenient or that they've gone through other things because of COVID as well. So we wanted to figure those out and make sure that if it's something that we can address through our service coordination, we are able to do that. All right. You can go to the next one now.

Okay. So this one I'm not going to spend a whole bunch of time with this because Stephanie already talked a little bit about engaging seniors. But so our resident engagement -- so our AMHA Community Action Network, which is our governing body, they meet monthly. Obviously, they vote on their RTPS dollars. And then they also just [inaudible] group, and it is largely seniors who are on this network.

So being able to transition this was a big deal. So we were able to transition this to a Zoom call. And the way that we did this is obviously this was our flyer. And we tried to make it extremely easy. Not only did we provide step-by-step info on the flyer, we had door-to-door instruction manuals distributed to all senior buildings. So each senior household got a, I guess, little pamphlet that essentially helped them get on. It was step-by-step, had pictures, had very, very easy to understand instructions.

And we ended up with 15 seniors at the first session and 10 at the second, which was huge. We honestly had zero expectations for having any number of people. But it ended up great. And the 15 seniors at the first session was actually higher than some of our in-person sessions. So that was a big deal. And I think this is one of the things moving forward that we may continue is having a call-in option so that people who do have transportation issues don't have to make it all the way to central to attend the ACAN community meetings. And I'm happy to provide that step-by-step guide if anyone wants it, but it's pretty simple.

And then the last thing that we did is virtual volunteering. In this, because we have the nonprofit but also because we have a pretty robust resident services department, we already had virtual volunteering sort of on our back burner -- not virtual volunteering but volunteering in general. And obviously with COVID we had to fast track it, and it became virtual.

So we moved forward very quickly with this. We ended up using an online platform called Central Net. And they have a free version and a paid version. I don't want to talk too much about it because I'm not sure we would go with it again. But it was a really good option on the fly, and it is a free option that gives you a lot of freedom to implement your program as you wish.

So that was that. We were able to figure that out. We wanted it to be a simple method where people could apply online, and we could process their applications online so that we didn't have a lot of back and forth or a lot of paper/digital paper applications.

The first thing we had to do was have just security discussions. We definitely did not think of this until our security director talked to us. So I have a few of the things that I wanted to just mention. If you're thinking of doing virtual volunteering, please think about the security discussion. Some of the things that he was concerned about was if it's going to be live, we need to have a way to be able to check what the volunteers are saying to people. So we had a story time planned, which is listed there. And we needed to be able to control what they were saying, not because of a control situation but just because for our own liability.

The letter writing was another security discussion. So we did launch a letter writing campaign for our seniors. Stephanie, that's something that maybe you could do at Christmas -- I don't know -- or other holidays for seniors. So all of our most isolated, we determined who was most isolated mostly through our service coordinators and who they were hearing from. And that was a coordination because we had to determine how we were going to get the letters to people, how we were going to make sure that everybody's privacy was kept under wraps for both the volunteer and the resident.

And so for that, we did come up with some barriers in terms of the capacity issue. It was a huge deal. We had them send their letters into our central office. Our secretary was going through and essentially reading them and figuring out where the best place for them to go would be. And so my suggestion for a letter writing campaign would be that you want to make it easy for people.

And by that I mean both staff and volunteers and residents. And you want to find a strategy and software that works for you, and whether that's some sort of Excel document or something like that being something for you to determine [inaudible] way that you can definitely track and figure it out.

But I'm going to wrap up because I know we are at time, and I want to leave time for Q&A. So if anyone has other questions, you can feel free to put it into the chat or you can e-mail me as well. Thanks, guys.

Mikayla Miller: Thank you. Thanks, Megan. I guess we'll go ahead and jump right into Q&A. I'll just go ahead and read the questions in the order they were received. And if anyone would like to raise their hand and use the unmute feature, I know we're over 4:00 o'clock a little bit, but we'd still like to get to these questions if we can.

I think this first question is for Stephanie. This person says, "How can small agencies undertake such programs when we don't have enough staff to take care of our day-to-day operations?"

Stephanie: Sorry. Could you just repeat the question for me? Sorry.

Mikayla Miller: Sure. No problem. How can small agencies undertake such programs, that you mentioned in your presentation, when we don't have enough staff to take care of our day-to-day operations?

Stephanie Spampanato: I think it's -- for us, it's very much about the strong partnerships. We spent several years building and maintaining partnerships. So I think that's the answer. I mean, we definitely rely on them to do a lot of the legwork in terms of writing the programs and putting them together and then presenting them. We're supported. A lot of our time is taken up in the planning with the partners to look at relevant or impactful programs. But it's definitely the partners that are doing the work. Yeah. I hope that answers the question.

Mikayla Miller: Thanks. Yeah. Thanks, Stephanie. Next question is for all the participants in general. "Could you guys please expand on your outreach? For example, how do you let residents know about your virtual programs and events? Do you guys use e-mails, flyers, calls?" If anyone, maybe one or two people can answer this question.

Megan Conkle: So this is Megan. I did mention a little bit, because of the nature of connectivity, we try really hard not to rely on digital means of communication for these types of things, or at least using that as a supplemental marketing piece and not the main marketing piece. So like a lot of our events that might have originally been put on Facebook, they might go on Facebook, but we're not going to assume that that is the only way that people are going to see it.

So I mentioned for the senior door-to-door, we did door-to-door for that. We do door hangers for a lot of our families, and our families are used to seeing those. So they get a pretty good feedback. But we also have done -- we recently used some of those funds I was talking about to buy headphones, sort of like Bobby was saying.

And when we were doing our headphone distribution outreach, we actually sent postcards door-to-door as well to anyone who had children, school age children. And the way we paid for that because I know that's always a question is through our tenant participation funds for postage, being able to send those out and because they were going to everyone and anyone was welcome to take them. So that's how we've been doing it.

But we also have a ConnectHome Akron website where we have been putting together a COVID-19 guide for tech in our area. And that has also acted for people who have limited access. We would be, you know, able to reach them that way. So that's how we've been doing it.

Mikayla Miller: All right. Thanks, Megan. That seems like a lot of different ways there. Does anyone else have anything to add? If not, we can move onto the next question. This is another one for all the panelists. This person asked, "How were your programs funded, and has a path for sustainability been developed? Is it internally funded, one-time funding, or ongoing forces?"

Bobby Coulter: I can talk about this one a little bit. Ours is entirely grant funded. But we do have some consistent funders. So there's one that are just on our schedule, and I think this is kind of what Stephanie and Megan talked about the relationships that you build. So there's certain grant funders that reach out to us, okay, it's time for the [inaudible] again for that one you did for, you know, last year. But ours are completely grant-funded, aside from staff time. Staff time is paid for by the agency.

Mikayla Miller: Great. Would anyone else like to add anything?

Megan Conkle: This is Megan. I'll just say that during COVID we've had really good success reaching out to our municipalities for other community development in that community development block grant. And so if you're in an area that receives those grants, you may have good luck doing connectivity work through them. We worked with three of the four municipalities in our area, and we have been able to leverage that. So that's a little tip for everybody.

Mikayla Miller: Thanks. Thanks. This next question is kind of a question. It's for Jessica. They were asking you to put some information for OATS in the chat so that they can have access to it. Are you able to do that, or did you want to just say a little more about OATS?

Jessica: Sure. I can certainly do that. And I just want to add, there's two portions to it. So one is just tech basics where they can access videos on how to use Zoom or how to use devices. Echo Dot is one of them, how to use their laptop, whatever it may be.

And I can send a link over for that. And then there's also a 24/7 hotline that they can call for support on any kind of device. So I think that's especially useful for residents who, you know, if it's past staff working hours, they can contact that line and get any kind of technical support. So I will get both of those through the chat.

Mikayla Miller: Thanks. Thanks. Thanks, Jessica. The next question, would it be possible to get your presentation slides for those who missed the session? I can answer that. Yes. All the slides will be posted on HUD Exchange after the presentation.

Next question for the panelists. "Has anyone used screenshare to [inaudible] promote perfectly provide remote technical support to clients?" They would like to hear any experiences on how it worked especially for those who are isolated.

Bobby Coulter: So for our class, Google Meet allows them to share their screen. And so there was some technical support, which that was originally one of our concerns is breakout sessions and being able to pull a student aside and help them. But it actually turned out to be even better that we couldn't do it in a vacuum because the student would share their screen, and we would all watch and they would be presenter. And someone else that was having the same issue -- what we found is someone else was having the same issue but just didn't want to speak up, and so they got their issue resolved. But we were doing it all through Google Meet.

Mikayla Miller: Did anyone else have any experience with that? All right. We can go to the next question. The next one comes from -- her name is Sheila. She says, "We are in the process on planning our senior programs virtually in which we would just start with some weekly chats and checkups, maybe bingo. Any experiences with seniors using Zoom or similar platforms? I know a few of you guys have already touched on this, but anything to add?"

Megan Conkle: For us, it was really important and as you start working on this, I think it's really important to remember, like I said earlier, to meet residents where they're at. I think -- let me look at your question again. So being able to go in and know that all of your weekly chats and checkups might look different, and people might have different abilities in terms of logging onto those. And also I wouldn't limit it to Zoom because if there are seniors who maybe use Facetime to talk to their grandchildren or their children, then they may be more comfortable using that.

And one of the things that we learned through our home visitation transition to virtual is just that if they feel more comfortable on something else, they're more likely to participate. So leaving it open to them if you already have a relationship to reach out and find out what they would prefer.

But if you're going to do Zoom, then just making sure that they have all of the step-by-step and they feel comfortable before the time so that -- and I would say the more communication and the more information you can give them about the platform, especially for seniors because it's just -- we run in so many times throughout this process of people just getting really overwhelmed and then we lose them in terms of the engagement. The engagement drops off, and it just is "too hard." So just making it an easy process I think is the number one recommendation that I have.

Mikayla Miller: Thanks, Megan. Thank you.

Stephanie Spampanato: Would I be able to add something?

Mikayla Miller: Oh, sure, sure. Yeah. Sure.

Stephanie Spampanato: Yeah. I just checked in with the team because I was thinking we started the virtual bingo and obviously the nutrition. But there are still some hard copies of materials that have to be delivered to the senior or the family's door in order for them to be able to participate. So I guess it's not 100 percent online. So they have to have their bingo cards and their marker or they have to have their nutrition booklet to be able to keep their calendar, their diary.

Mikayla Miller: Thanks, Stephanie. Yeah. That's definitely helpful. The next question is for everyone in general, I guess, or those who mentioned working with partners. "How are your partners compensated? Are they provided services pro bono or through their own funding sources?"

Jessica: So this is Jessy. And most of our partners, they have their own funding that they go through, and then they work with the housing authority, with us, on an individual contract.

Mikayla Miller: Thanks, Jessy. Does anyone else have anything? Anyone funded a little differently?

Stephanie Spampanato: No. It's basically the same for us. I mean, I think sometimes you give and you take with your partners. Like, for example, some of our partners pre-COVID, they needed a space to hold their monthly meeting. We'll offer some of our community spaces that aren't being used. There's a lot of give and take.

Mikayla Miller: Thank you. Thanks, Stephanie. Next question -- we have two more questions left. Hang in there, guys. I know we're a little bit over time.

And this next question is for Jessica. It says, "Did you face any obstacles or setbacks for management approval with using Starry's infrastructure in your building?" They also asked, "Did you use the messaging system? Did your housing authority allocate funds for this, or did you apply for funding to cover the cost of services? Also, do residents have to pay anything towards the cost of service?"

Jessica: So we have amazing management, and they were on board with Starry from the get-go. So there was no hurdles in that respect. As far as every resident, there were a couple parts to that question. So for every resident, they can access it. It's \$15 for high speed Internet. Tax is included. And that was their contract with the housing authority for residents that are part of our housing authority. I'm not sure about the messaging system, but I do know that they used existing telephone lines in order to set up this infrastructure. I hope that answered it fully.

Mikayla Miller: I think so. Thank you. And if not, feel free to ask any questions after the call. Our last question is how do these programs work with Housing Choice Voucher participants since the majority of these programs are targeting residents in subsidized properties? And I guess that's for anyone, if anyone [inaudible] answer.

Stephanie Spampanato: I can speak to that just at the moment [inaudible] journey, we're actually just [inaudible] public and affordable. The plan would be once we've got it down to open it up to some of our Housing Choice Voucher households, but currently not.

Mikayla Miller: All right.

[talking over each other]

Megan Conkle: Sorry. Go ahead.

Mikayla Miller: No. Megan, go ahead.

Megan Conkle: I was just going to say it's always going to be a little bit harder to work with Housing Choice Voucher just because of the funding mechanisms that we inherently rely on. I will say that our early childhood programs, they're very specific to our area, but they are also not only for Housing Choice Voucher recipients but they're also for community members who are

not in our housing but meet the income threshold. So we've been able to use some of those home visitation virtual changes for Housing Choice Voucher.

But in terms of the virtual volunteering and things like that, you can easily make that -- if you have a Housing Choice Voucher initiative that you would like to implement but you don't the capacity or staff that's allowed or able to work with those residents, then that would be a really great place to start with your virtual volunteering because your volunteers aren't bound by anything about where they can work. So that might be a good way to circumvent any barriers with Housing Choice Voucher.

Mikayla Miller: All right. Thanks, Megan. Thank you. And thanks to everyone for joining. That was the last question. So I do want to thank you guys. And before we log off, I do want to pass it over to Dina for a few closing remarks.

Just a reminder from me, if you haven't already, please register for tomorrow's sessions. We have some great sessions from some of our ConnectHomeUSA community stakeholders. And I'll pass it over to Dina.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Thank you so much. So as I started out, I said you guys were going to have an all-star panel and I think you saw what I meant. The questions definitely showed a lot of interest in the great work that our four communities are currently undertaking and the innovation and creativity that they have demonstrated. So thank you to all of our panelists. Thank you to the audience for participating.

And as Mikayla said, a lot of the stakeholders that were mentioned today like Starry, PCs for People, GitHub, they will all be featured tomorrow. So please stay tuned. If you have not registered, there is still time to register. So thanks again for all your participation. And to our wonderful panelists, thank you so much. And we will be in touch soon.

Female: Thank you.

Female: Thanks, everyone. Bye-bye.

Female: Thank you. Bye.

(END)