LeadingAge® CAST
center for aging services technologies

Case Study:
Intergenerational Technology Support and Training during COVID-19: Going Virtual

Connecting Generations
Cyber-Seniors™

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Categories:
- ◆ Technical Support
- ◆ Education and Training
- ◆ Programming

About the Organization

Organization Name:
Cyber-Seniors

Main Contributor:
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Organization Type:
Tech Training and Support Programs for Older Adults

Organization Description:
Cyber-Seniors is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to bridge the digital divide and connect generations through technology. Since our inception in 2015, we have developed and disseminated thousands of resources enabling organizations (e.g., libraries, senior centers, retirement communities, schools, and places of worship) throughout North America and the world, to provide tech training for older adults using an inter-generational volunteer model.

Project Description

Pre-COVID, Cyber-Seniors supported organizations who serve seniors by developing and disseminating resources to enable them to provide in-person tech-training programs using an intergenerational volunteer model. When COVID-19 restrictions were imposed, Cyber-Seniors responded by adapting its existing service delivery model to a virtual format, providing organizations with two options for ensuring seniors have access to tech-training and support. Seniors can connect directly to Cyber-Seniors free online services or organizations can partner with Cyber-Seniors to set up custom training and programming to meet the specific needs of their members/residents/volunteers/etc. Cyber-Seniors' service includes a phone-in tech helpline, one-on-one tech support and training, group tech training webinars, and online social and health/wellness programs. In addition, Cyber-Seniors provides training programs for seniors who are first-time users receiving community-sponsored tablets or laptops, as well as training for senior volunteers who wish to continue their volunteer work virtually.

Business Model

Cyber-Seniors' free service, that is directly available to all seniors, is supported through grants and donations and further subsidized through revenue generating programs. Organizations can direct individuals to Cyber-Seniors through the distribution of flyers (with our toll-free telephone line), or by creating notices and links to the Cyber-Seniors' website through newsletters and/or from websites.

Organizations with specific needs or wishing to create their own virtual tech training program can partner with Cyber-Seniors to deliver cost-effective, online programming. Cyber-Seniors has invested in secure technology and has an extensive volunteer workforce, who have all completed requisite training, speak a number of different languages, and have a wide range of expertise in technology. Most organizations do not have the resources to readily or affordably reproduce the systems and processes Cyber-Seniors has in place, making partnership a viable option. Cyber-Seniors' pre-COVID experience in developing tech training tools and resources, coupled with the thousands of virtual trainings we have delivered since the COVID-19 outbreak, has provided us with a level of expertise that can benefit other organizations who are working to achieve the same goal of keeping seniors socially connected and safe.

Programs such as Volunteer Training and New Device Training can be purchased by organizations who deliver Foster Grandparents and RSVP programs, as well as organizations who are delivering devices to underserved seniors in their communities. The fee for these programs ranges from $50-$100/participant. Organizations wishing to partner with Cyber-Seniors to create virtual tech training and online programs are

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charged an annual fee that is commensurate with the level of service and the number of seniors served.

Implementation Approach

FREE OPTION
Organizations can direct their members/residents/ volunteers/etc. to [Cyber-Seniors](#) free services through the distribution of flyers or by posting information on their website and/or in their newsletter.

PARTNERSHIP OPTION
Organizations can partner with Cyber-Seniors to deliver the following services and create their own virtual tech training program:

◆ **Support for Incoming Calls:** Cyber-Seniors provides organizations with their own unique toll-free phone number that is answered in English, Spanish, and French, 5 days/week, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. EST. Calls come in through Cyber-Seniors' secure call center platform that blocks all numbers (i.e. operators cannot see incoming numbers) and all calls are recorded. After-hour messages are returned the next business day.

◆ **One-on-One Mentoring Sessions:** Cyber-Seniors provides organizations with a calendar plugin to post on their website. This allows visitors to their website to sign up for one-on-one sessions with a mentor. Seniors specify what they are looking for help with and their language preference. They can also request a specific mentor and invite a caregiver to be included in the session. When a senior signs-up, Cyber-Seniors searches its database and sends out notifications to mentors in the community that matches the search criteria. If no one from that community is available, we are able to pull from our large and diverse volunteer database to find a suitable candidate. Cyber-Seniors uses a secure cloud-based communication platform for all one-on-one telephone support. Callers' numbers are hidden from the operator's view and calls are recorded. In addition, Cyber-Seniors monitors calls to ensure timeliness. If and when a call is delayed, we step in immediately to investigate and rectify the problem.

◆ **Webinar Production:** Cyber-Seniors provides a Zoom platform, sets up registration (making sure to collect demographic information), and produces any number of webinars on any topic an organization chooses. Webinars are staffed with one of our professional trainers, as well as a minimum of 4 mentors for every 20 seniors participating. All sessions are recorded, edited, and can be posted on the organization's website or YouTube channel.

◆ **Mentor Training Program for Youth in Your Community:** Many organizations Cyber-Seniors works with want to create their own virtual Cyber-Seniors program whereby they bring together young people and seniors from their own community to create programming and build relationships. Cyber-Seniors provides organizations with support in recruiting, training, and matching volunteer mentors and seniors from the same community.

◆ **Impact Surveys:** Cyber-Seniors provides organizations with impact data from standardized surveys that are administered to determine if participating seniors have increased their use of technology and have experienced decreased feelings of social isolation.

CUSTOMIZED TRAINING OPTIONS
These customized programs provide up to five hours of focused training supplemented with unlimited practice and ongoing support as needed. Training focuses on the specific the outcomes goals of the organization. For example, training a group of seniors to carry out their volunteer work virtually, training a group of seniors to use a tablet for the first time to increase self-sufficiency, etc. Programs are delivered by Cyber-Seniors' experienced technology instructors, supported by Cyber-Seniors' trained volunteer mentors.

Program Structure
◆ Programs begin with a call to each participant to assess their level of competency in technology and to schedule additional individual sessions to teach them how to get on Zoom or your organization's preferred video platform.

◆ This is followed by a one-hour group orientation webinar and up to four one-hour group lessons where participants are taught how to use their devices and the many features it offers based on the goals of the program. For example, Foster Grandparents are taught how to use functions such as screen sharing and whiteboard, as well as how to download other applications such as PDF readers for ebooks and other reading material. Individuals who are being taught to use a device for the first time will be taught how to carryout various tasks using the preloaded apps and any other priority activities identified by your organization.

◆ Each lesson ends with a Q & A period in which participants have the opportunity to clarify anything they have not understood. Participants are also encouraged to book additional one-on-one sessions following the group lessons, for additional help.

◆ After completing the group lessons, participants have access to unlimited individual practice sessions, along with ongoing coaching and support as they begin their virtual journey.

Outcomes

Since April 1, 2020, Cyber-Seniors has provided online programs and services to over 40,000 attendees.

Here are some highlights from surveys administered to seniors who have participated in our virtual programming.

Seniors who participated in our general programs (i.e. Telephone support, one-on-one mentoring, and group webinars):

◆ 87% reported lacking companionship before joining Cyber-Seniors and this decreased to 60% after participating in the Cyber-Seniors program.

◆ 84% stated they felt left out at times before joining Cyber-Seniors and this decreased to 57% after participating in the Cyber-Seniors program.

◆ 84% reported feeling isolated from others before joining Cyber-Seniors and this decreased to 63% after participating in the Cyber-Seniors program.

Seniors who participated in our Volunteer Training Program:

◆ 98% felt that the instruction met their needs.

◆ 96% reported that the instruction was clear and understandable.

◆ 100% stated that the instructor gave them adequate opportunity to ask questions.

◆ 96% reported that at no point did they feel intimidated or too shy to ask questions.

◆ 86% believe individual mentoring is important in the overall training program.

◆ 90% stated that they were able to carry out their virtual volunteer work independently following completion of the training program.

◆ 90% reported feeling more confident in using technology after completing the training program.

◆ 76% report to be using technology more often in their day-to-day life after participating in the program.

Challenges and Pitfalls to Avoid

As a result of COVID-19, Cyber-Seniors transformed to a virtual system and made a number of changes to its policies and procedures and invested in new technology to ensure security, quality assurance, and scalability. This was challenging as it required a significant investment of resources. Not knowing how long COVID would last, and what long-term impact it would have on older adults, it was unclear if this was a prudent investment. As it turns out, we believe we made the right decision and are now no longer limited by geographic location and have the ability to expand our program's capacity.

One significant challenge Cyber-Seniors continues to face is the lack of availability of affordable WiFi and devices for the population we serve. This challenge is being addressed by working with community partners to solicit donations and discounted WiFi services.

While we acknowledge the many challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we also acknowledge that these hurdles drove innovation and led to new solutions for approaching the problems of social isolation and loneliness amongst older adults.

Lessons Learned/Advice to Share with Others

Very early on in our conversion to virtual programming we realized that we needed to provide seniors with an option for communication and initial training using a good-old-fashion telephone landline. Many of the seniors we are reaching have no capacity initially to get online, therefore we needed to be able to reach them through other means. We addressed this challenge by developing flyers with our toll-free phone line and asked senior living operators to slip them under their residents' doors and encouraged senior centers and other community partners to post flyers in their communities. We have made these flyers available for download on our website.

Pre-COVID one of our biggest challenges was how to reach seniors living in rural communities and those that were homebound. We found the solution is to create a virtual option with telephone support. We now intend to offer virtual tech training, support, online programming, and a telephone support line, in conjunction with in-person programming going forward.

Pre-COVID we struggled with how to ensure long-term adoption of technology by seniors. Very often when seniors run into difficultly with technology, they simply stop using it. By offering a telephone support line and one-on-one tech support, seniors are able to access the help they need, when they need it. From our preliminary data we believe this has resulted in an increased long-term adoption of technology by seniors.