

The Department for the Aging Continues to Bridge the Digital Divide for Older Adults

For decades, the internet has been used to bring people together in ways that before were unimaginable, while giving them opportunities they otherwise would not have had. But even in New York, where communities have access to high quality broadband, there are still many communities that do not, including older adults. The COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated some of the problems those of us in the aging service community see every day, but increased broadband access has and will continue to help us manage these problems.

According to a recent Silver Study, 22 percent of older New Yorkers did not have access to the internet, and 22 percent said they did not own or use computers, smartphones, or tablets.

In the over seven million calls to older residents that the Department for the Aging (DFTA) made during the pandemic, we were worried that many older adults would become socially isolated. While social isolation can affect people of any age, during the pandemic older adults were asked to stay inside, which made them more at-risk. Social isolation can lead to health problems including depression and heart disease.



That is why in October of 2021, DFTA announced we would be distributing 10,000 mobile tablets to homebound older adults, who previously had no way of getting online. These tablets helped them access the virtual programs and services that older adult centers provide, as well as other City services. This also allowed them to keep in touch with family and friends through Zoom and other online communication methods, reducing social isolation.

This past week at Borinquen Court in the Bronx, we distributed the last 1,000 of the tablets to older New Yorkers. Even though older adult centers are now open at full capacity, we know that these tablets, and the programs that older residents can access through them, will continue to play a large part in how we serve these populations.

Online programs have proven to be very popular. In the past two years, more than 170 older adult centers began to offer free programs that include fitness classes, arts & crafts and music, all over Zoom where residents can see each other and socialize. These virtual programs have had more than 40,000 attendees.

Many of these programs are also on-demand, allowing older adults to take them on their own schedule, and some are available in different languages including Spanish, Chinese, Italian, Russian, French, Polish, Korean and Arabic, to account for all the backgrounds that are representative of New York's older population.

Being able to access City resources online allowed older residents to sustain their quality of life when they could not visit friends and family. Many of

these resources were not online before the pandemic, but going forward, our Community Care Plan will help expand these programs to communities that are currently underserved. This includes access to the online library we are creating, allowing older residents to utilize our programs anytime they wish.

The pandemic has taught us that we need to be flexible and ready for unexpected changes, including future emergencies. Digital connection to virtual programs and services, friends and family will continue being an important component of this readiness and flexibility, especially for some of our most vulnerable populations.



By Commissioner
Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez