

Using Tech to Revolutionize How Older Adults Connect

Technology can help give older adults the programs, socialization and experiences they love and need

COVID-19 times find many older adults feeling isolated with seemingly few options. Meanwhile, many facilities and organizations serving older adults are experiencing challenges with limited staff time, fewer program options, technology challenges, lack of funding and more.¹ We're excited to say that the Anderson Township Senior Center (ATSC) in Cincinnati, Ohio and the Wood County Committee on Aging (WCCOA) in Wood County, Ohio are meeting these challenges and evolving, connecting with members using internet technology, software and hardware.

Consider Hazel, a senior center regular before the pandemic. She's no stranger to the digital world. She uses a tablet to read books, check in on social media, read emails, and play games. But when programs were forced online to Zoom, a platform Hazel hadn't used, this tech-savvy member lost her digital courage about participating. After a few over-the-phone help sessions on how to use Zoom, Hazel was back on-board enjoying programs and connecting with others again.

At ATSC and WCCOA, active older adults like Hazel are the inspiration to create and deliver lively, educational programming in new ways. Key components come together to help make it happen:

- Staff and volunteers with technical skills to produce programming and help with questions
- Creative programming staff
- Engaged membership staff
- Willing members
- TECHNOLOGY

Opportunities are available no matter where older adults call home, whether they're living independently in their own home or in retirement communities, assisted living facilities or long-term care facilities. All it takes is the right resources and equipment:

- Laptop computer or other "smart device" (desktop computer, tablet, smartphone, etc.)
- High-speed internet
- Online meeting capabilities of Zoom.com (or another similar videoconference approach)
- For Group Gatherings
 - Projectors (ready to plug-and-play) or large-screen monitors
 - Speaker systems that allow older adults to hear effectively, including bluetooth-enabled audio connecting directly with hearing aids where possible

What does a revolutionary digital and in-real-life experience look like? Here are just a few ideas:

- **Regular coffee chats and virtual dining** – Have coffee or lunch with other adults in person or from wherever they are, connecting via Zoom
- **Speakers** – Offer talks by experts covering thousands of topics on video. TED Talks provide free programming without logistics challenges

- **Hobby group gatherings** – Experience presentations from world-wide experts on many topics of interest: oil painting, watercolors, knitting, quilting, gardening, book clubs, carving, dancing, parenting/grand-parenting, technology and more
- **Healthy Body & Mind** – Interact with trainers on various topics: aerobic exercise, stretching, yoga, strength & balance, meditation plus better balance & self-defense
- **Support Groups** – It's hard enough being a caregiver without having to make arrangements to leave the home for a meeting. Virtual support group meetings to the rescue :-)
- **Competitions** – Older adults can compete “on the big screen” with themselves and others in Wii bowling, tennis, balance and other “games”
- **Entertainment** – Enjoy movies, sporting events and concerts in a group setting
- **Travel** – See the world without leaving the comfort of the couch! Weekly trips in life-sized form: nature, historical locations, zoos, museums, etc.
- **and many, many more exciting experiences** crafted by skilled program staff

Collaborating with other older adult-focused facilities becomes easier too. Why not share certain programs with a “partner site(s),” using strengths of each to create an even more vibrant program calendar? A fringe-benefit is that older adults meet others with similar interests from different geographies. Plus, sharing technical expertise is an opportunity for locations without in-house experts.

We hope you will join us in this technology revolution, especially as COVID-19 continues affecting in-person opportunities. Our upcoming two articles will discuss solutions to technology obstacles (see P.S. below) and additional programming opportunities. In revolutionizing through technology, we will be substantially upgrading experiences for older adults in their homes and at older adult facilities in 2020 and for many years to come as we navigate the post-COVID world with new skills, programs and opportunities!

*P.S. With all this talk of technology, we also want to consider older adults like our friend “Chris.” Chris has been active with us for years – coming for lunch, listening to lectures, playing cards and sometimes going on trips. With the senior center closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chris is losing a lot of socialization. Until now, Chris has been satisfied to have a landline phone with no need for “smart devices.” As COVID-19 threatens to keep older adult group settings closed for months to come, we must consider the many “Chris-like people.” **Our next article will discuss ways to overcome obstacles for older adults who do not currently possess the technology and/or the ability to use it.** While we can't make technology accessible for all older adults, our goal is to share our programming with as many as possible, both now in our COVID-19 world AND once we're able to meet in-person again!*

¹ <https://www.ncoa.org/news/press-releases/community-based-organizations-struggle-to-meet-shifting-needs-of-older-adults-during-covid-19/>

CONTRIBUTORS:

- Steve Long is Founder of Long Memories, LLC and currently a member of the Anderson Township Senior Center Advisory Committee (previously chairing the team). He can be reached at salong_now@yahoo.com
- Rita Brieschke is Program & Technology Specialist at Wood County Committee on Aging, Inc.. She can be reached at rbetz@wccoa.net