COMMUNITY RESOURCE GUIDE:
TECHNOLOGY ACCESS AND PROGRAMMING FOR OLDER ADULTS

Developed by the Technology Subcommittee of the
Massachusetts Task Force to End Loneliness and Build Community

This community resource guide was developed to provide communities and community-based organizations with ideas of how to start or strengthen technology programs for older adults.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TECHNOLOGY ACCESS

Access to technology, including internet use, is a social determinant of health. Throughout the pandemic, we have seen how technology access plays a critical role in all of our lives:

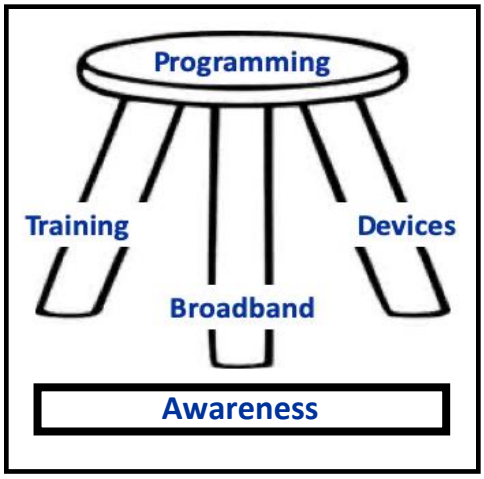
- Connecting with friends and family
- Engaging in online events, programming, and learning
- Working remotely
- Receiving health care services
- Staying up-to-date on the latest information

> "There's a lot of resources out there and it doesn't matter if the resources are out there. It's getting people to engage. That's the key."
>
> "I am a new user of this phone, two months, so I could hardly do anything with this phone. But the students here encouraged me to ask questions, and so when I came back and forgot something I just asked them and I am learning slowly."

Technology access is important for people of all ages. **It is a myth that older adults are uninterested or unwilling to use new forms of technology.** According to national survey data, 8 out of 10 older adults own a cell phone and over a third own a tablet. In Massachusetts, internet use among people age 60 and older was 71% according to the Healthy Aging Data Report from 2018. That number has likely grown as the pandemic necessitated online engagement.

Regardless of age, there is a wide spectrum of comfort using different technologies. **It is important to remember that technology is always changing** – and that one can never make assumptions about someone's interest or ability in using various devices or applications. Depending on the individual, an "advanced" skillset may be using a teleconferencing platform to join an online class, texting a friend, or turning on a smartphone!

THE THREE LEGS OF THE TECHNOLOGY ACCESS STOOL



Technology programs for older adults may take on many different goals and structures, yet many require three common components in order to be successful. These components can be thought of as the three legs of a balanced stool: (1) **training**, (2) **broadband**, and (3) **devices**.

These legs work together to provide online **programming**, and are enabled by increased **awareness** of the need to close the digital divide and provide equitable technology access to older adults.

The following section provides definitions for each piece of the stool framework as well as key questions to consider for your technology program.

Published September 2021

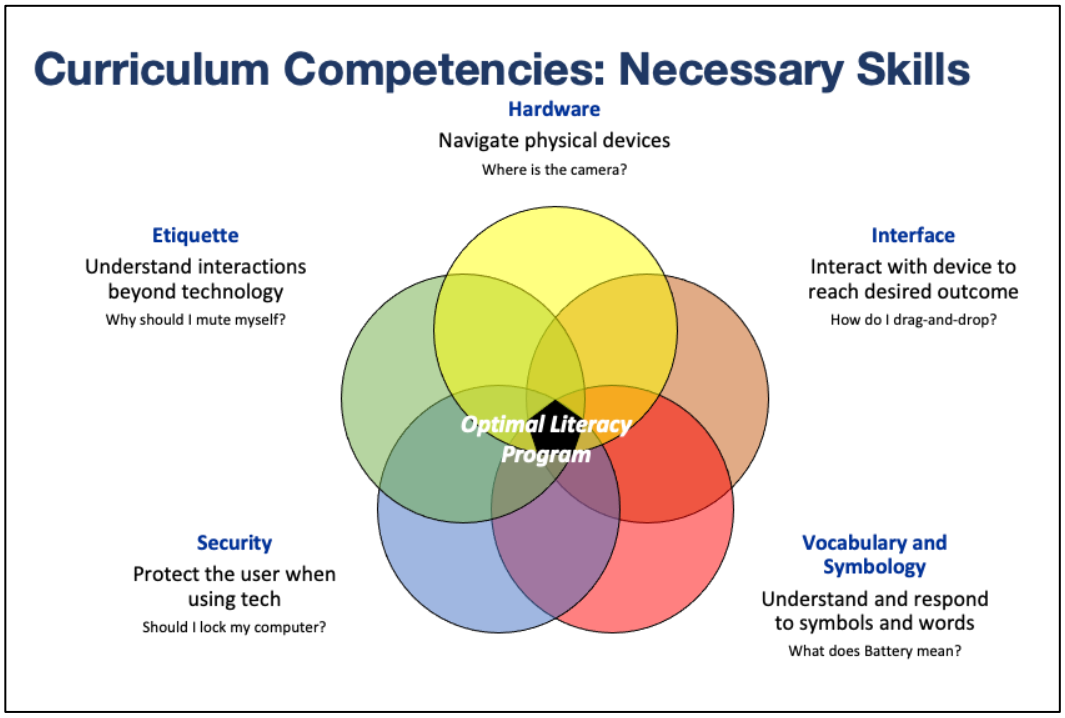
***PROGRAMMING*:** Virtual events and programs provide opportunities for older adults to engage with their community and contribute their voice, experience, and skills remotely.

- ☑ What does virtual programming look like in a hybrid world? A hybrid program or service allows for participation both live (in-person) and virtual (remote). A successful hybrid program offers an optimal visual and audio experience to all participants, regardless of their physical location.
- ☑ How do people learn about our virtual programs?
- ☑ How can we help people who may be interested in participating but either do not know how or are experiencing other barriers?
- ☑ How can we use virtual programming to reach new audiences and promote equitable access?
- ☑ Are there "low-tech" options to technology programming? For example, a wellness program that encourages participants to take pictures on their tablet as a photo journal.

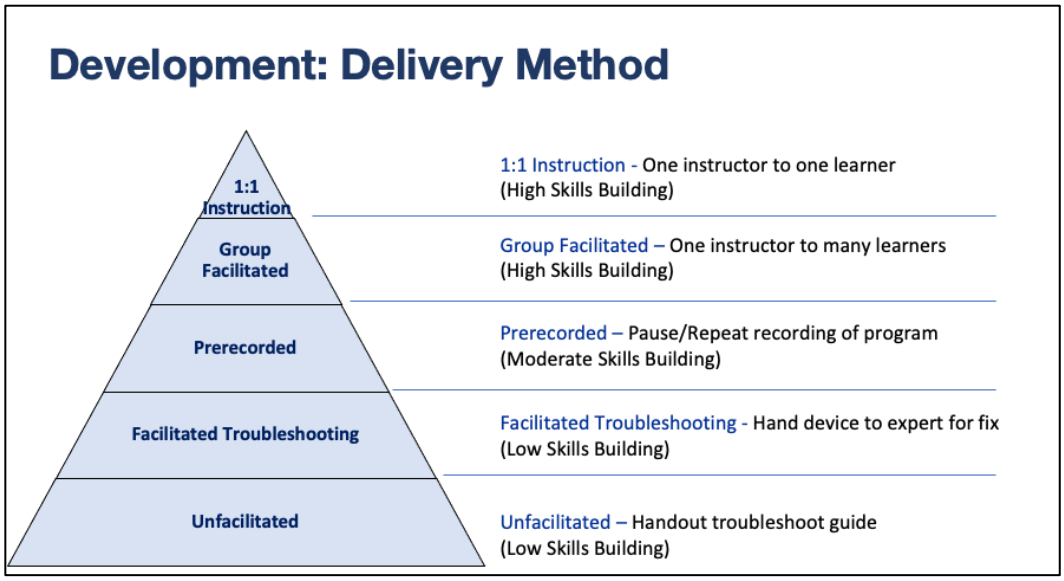
TRAINING: Training can take on many forms and also has other words associated with it, such as education, digital literacy, and troubleshooting. Regardless of the method, the most successful training links the technology to the older adult's goal, such as FaceTiming with a grandchild or participating in a senior center virtual event.

- ☑ How can we standardize training as much as possible? For example, can we limit training needs by minimizing the types of devices and software offered?
- ☑ How can we provide training that accommodates various learning styles, accessibility needs, and levels of comfort using technology?
- ☑ What kind of ongoing support is available to help users troubleshoot technology issues or tackle in-the-moment questions?
- ☑ How can training be offered in a hybrid world? What makes sense to do in-person?

The following diagam offers one way to think about the skills needed to achieve digital literacy. There are five categories for organizations to consider.



The following diagam depicts a variety of training methods for digital literacy. Organizations may consider factors such as consumer preference, resources and capacity, and operational experience when choosing the optimal method for their organization and community.



BROADBAND: Broadband and internet access are foundational for technology access and engagement. Not only is an internet connection necessary, but the speed of that connection is critical for fully participating in certain aspects of the virtual world, such as streaming videos or engaging in a virtual town hall meeting.

- ☑ How can we leverage discounted internet programs, such as Lifeline and the Emergency Broadband Benefit, as well as public WiFi to help older adults?
- ☑ Is the person's internet speed adequate for robust digital access, such as video use?
- ☑ For first-time internet users, installation and set-up can be a challenge. How can we support those who may require additional help? For example, are there short-term solutions (e.g., WiFi hotspots or internet-enabled devices) that could get someone started?
- ☑ The internet unfortunately invites scams and other threats. What protections can we encourage older adults to take to avoid abuse?

DEVICES: Devices are the hardware associated with technology access. There are many different types, such as smart phones, tablets, computers, as well as a variety of manufacturers. The market for older adult-friendly devices is also growing, and may include product features that help someone who is new to digital technology. Keep in mind that there are devices for individuals with hearing loss, low vision, or blindness.

- ☑ Are there opportunities to work with others in the community for free or discounted devices?
- ☑ Can devices be loaned out for a fixed time in a "lending library" format?
- ☑ Is the device set up in a way that is easy and intuitive for the older adult? For example, minimizing the number of apps displayed on the home screen, defaulting the internet home page, or using a physical keyboard instead of a touchscreen.
- ☑ How is the hardware designed, and is it user-friendly? Would accessories, such as a mouse, be helpful?

AWARENESS: For older adults to benefit from technology, it is critical to raise awareness about its value and the challenges associated with the digital divide.

- ☑ How can we raise awareness of technology options and benefits for older adults?

- ☑ Are the technology options that exist today rooted in what older adults want and need?
- ☑ To what extent is our organization an advocate and steward for closing the digital divide for older adults? Are there ways in which we can amplify the voices of older adults and those serving older adults?
- ☑ How are we collaborating with local organizations, such as schools and libraries, to bring awareness and leverage resources?

TEN LESSONS FROM COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

The following summarizes real lessons learned from community-based organizations and aging services providers who started or scaled technology programs for older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Learnings come from a range of organizations – some at the start of their journey and others who have decades of experience!

1) INCORPORATE EQUITY ALONG ALL THREE LEGS OF THE STOOL

It is critical to take an equity lens when developing or refining technology programs. For instance, are training sessions available in multiple languages? Are devices accessible for people who are blind or visually impaired or deaf or hard of hearing? Are people in multigenerational households or affordable housing able to access high speed internet? How do we build trust and engage with older adults who may be first-time users?

2) THINK ABOUT SCALE & SUSTAINABILITY

During the pandemic, resources such as devices and internet became more readily accessible. Now that we are moving towards a new normal, it is important to think about how to sustain those resources in the case that there is an end date, or how to bake in elements of scale and sustainability from the start of developing a technology program. For instance, starting a pilot program with one volunteer for training may generate learnings over a 6-12 month period that allows your organization to think more strategically about volunteer recruitment and education to help scale the program.

3) USE THIS AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO REFRAME AGING

Implicit ageism and internalized ageism are fairly common when it comes to technology use and older adults. Take this as an opportunity to challenge your organization's or community's assumptions about aging, including the interests and abilities of older people. Also, note that internalized ageism ("I'm too old to learn something new!") does occur with technology, which is why it is important to use personal interests and goals to introduce technology to new users.

4) SET GOALS TO MAKE TECHNOLOGY ACCESS MEANINGFUL

It is important to remember that technology is just a tool. Older adults are often motivated to learn and use technology if it aligns with their interests or goals, such as looking at family photos, video chatting with friends, or taking an online class. Teaching someone about technology without a specific end goal is challenging.

5) IF POSSIBLE, LIMIT THE TECHNOLOGICAL OPTIONS

As you build your program, think about what hardware and software you want to use and limit alternatives. For instance, pick one type of tablet with one type of internet browser application. By limiting options, you can take steps to simplify your training and troubleshooting efforts and decrease the stress associated with staying up to speed on hundreds of different devices, programs, and apps!
Note that while simplification is a great goal, you may need to be flexible to provide the most accessible options for some participants.

6) GET CREATIVE ABOUT RESOURCES

Providing internet, devices, and training can feel like a lot, but there are numerous opportunities to provide the three legs of the stool creatively and budget conscious. For example, maybe the local school has access to laptops now that students are returning to the classroom. Or maybe your Town Hall or regional planning organization has someone who became a technology training expert to help with public meetings. Maybe this could be an opportunity to recruit new volunteers or create an intergenerational program.

7) WHO IS YOUR ORGANIZATION'S POINT PERSON?

Whether intentional or not, many community-based organizations and aging services providers became places for older adults to contact to receive technology support. As you build, refine, or scale your program, it is important to think about your staffing structure and be able to answer the question: "Who is your organization's point person for consumer technology?". Depending on the size and needs of your program, this person may be fully or partially dedicated, and may be a full-time staff person or volunteer. Regardless, it is important to set clear expectations and boundaries such as limiting technology office hours, helpline time, or types of assistance.

8) CONTINUOUSLY LEARN FROM AND LISTEN TO OLDER ADULTS

Any well-developed program incorporates older adults' voices from the start, and the same is true with technology programming. Start by asking older adults about their preferences, attitudes, and goals regarding technology, and use early conversations as a way to introduce older adults to the value of the internet and digital technology. As the program is designed and implemented, engage older adults along the way and continuously refine based on their feedback, needs, and ideas.

9) BE AN ADVOCATE FOR REDUCING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Throughout the pandemic, many of us have experienced the value of being able to stay digitally connected. Even now, as we operate in a new normal, issues around the digital divide and equitable technology access are at the forefront of many national, state, and municipal conversations. It is critical that older adults and family caregivers are included in the dialogue as well. If you are looking for key advocacy messages, please see this sample letter by the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative.

10) REMEMBER, YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Starting or expanding a technology program can feel daunting, but is important to remember that there are various partners in your community who may be able to help. Schools, libraries, places of worship, community centers, and municipal government are all examples of potential partners. Remember, during the pandemic, we all had to pivot to digital in some way. In addition, non-profit technology literacy organizations and internet service providers may be able to help.

CASE STUDIES AND EXAMPLES

Case Study #1: Northampton Senior Services Tech Loan and Training Program

Northampton Senior Services hired a contractor to work with older adults one-on-one and help them learn to use an iPad. The program is open to all members of the Senior Center, with no income qualifications or restrictions. Northampton also launched a Tech Loan Program for older adults to use tablets on a short-term basis. The Senior Center purchased iPads and Chromebooks with internet included. Click here to read the full case study.

Contact Information: Marie Westburg, Director of Northampton Senior Services, mwestburg@northamptonma.gov

Case Study #2: Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly (LBFE)-Boston CitySites and Digital Dividends Program
LBFE-Boston launched its first intergenerational program in 2015, CitySites. This partnership with service-learning and community-engagement programs at colleges and universities offers weekly opportunities to bring younger and older people together. This partnership with service-learning and community-engagement programs at colleges and universities offers weekly opportunities to bring younger and older people together. LBFE is also launching the Digital Dividends Program in Fall 2021 in partnership with service-learning and community-engagement programs at colleges and universities. The program will offer weekly intergenerational tech training and support in public and affordable senior housing. Click here to read the full case study.

Contact Information: Cynthia Wilkerson, Program Director, Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly, cwilkerson.bos@littlebrothers.org

Case Study #3: Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services (SCES) Tech Support Coach Volunteer Program
Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services (SCES) developed the Tech Support Coach Volunteer Program during the pandemic in response to clients' requests for assistance with devices such as smart phones and tablets. The program pairs eligible older adults (Somerville and Cambridge residents who need help learning the basics of a device, Zoom, and/or email) with volunteer "tech coaches" who provide short-term assistance in person and over the phone. Click here to read the full case study.

Contact Information: Colleen Morrissey, Director of Volunteers & Special Projects, colleen.morrissey@eldercare.org

Case Study #4: The Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (MABVI) Access Technology Training Program
The Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (MABVI) launched the Access Technology Training program in 2017 to provide technology instruction for people who are blind or visually impaired. This training can open access to printed and digital information, social connection and communication, transportation, healthcare information, and more. Through individual lessons participants learn to use technology to meet their own goals and needs. Click here to read the full case study.

Contact Information: Rachel Castle, Access Technology Coordinator, Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired, rcastle@mabcommunity.org

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Please visit the resource page for more information, resources, and examples related to technology access and programming.

If you have additional questions, would like to contribute a resource, or would like to speak with someone about technology access and programming, please contact James Fuccione, Senior Director of the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative at James.Fuccione@mahealthyaging.org.

This resource guide represents the work of countless individuals and organizations throughout the Commonwealth who are committed to bridging the digital divide for older adults. Central to that work is the Massachusetts Task Force to End Loneliness and Build Community and the associated Technology Subcommittee. If you are interested in learning more about the Task Force and the Technology Subcommittee, please contact Molly Evans (Molly.R.Evans@mass.gov) at the Executive Office of Elder Affairs.