



## Bridging the Digital Divide to Help Participants Stay Engaged

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For seniors in San Francisco and beyond using the internet is often a challenge, so much so that their lack of access is referred to among service providers as the “digital divide”. Among the population SteppingStone serves, low-income frail elders and adults with disabilities, many speaking a primary language other than English, bridging the digital divide is challenging. This newsletter focuses on how SteppingStone addressed this challenge, particularly in response to the urgent need for online care created by the COVID pandemic. We look at how this effort was implemented at one of our four Centers.

SteppingStone has long provided participants with online access and training at our care Centers, in partnership with the Community Living Campaign technological support program. However, very few clients took advantage as this program as few owned computers. Indeed, prior to the COVID pandemic, the vast majority of participants were not computer literate and had never been online. For many it was far outside their experience and something they were simply not interested in learning.

The COVID pandemic changed everything, as San Francisco shut down and online access became essential to daily life for seniors and everyone else. SteppingStone participants were particularly at risk from any interruption in their health care and from social isolation.

*“Our team of clinicians saw immediately that participants’ health would worsen without increased engagement, some of which could clearly be done online. The first step was using ZOOM to offer physical therapy classes, recreational activities and individual consultations. However, we knew most of our clients couldn’t access online programs so we committed to helping them get online.” Daniel Gallagher, Executive Director.*

SteppingStone has some profound strengths helping clients get online. First, and foremost, is our cultural and language skills to provide information to participants in an appropriate manner and in their primary language. Second, the staff at each Center knows their clients well, having cared for most of them for many months or years. Finally, we are in communication with participants and/or their caregivers multiple times every week, usually daily. Staff can provide instructions how to get online routinely, every day if needed, with instruction offered in each client’s primary language by someone that knows them well.

If a participant had online access in their homes this instruction and support was usually sufficient to help them get online. However, the many clients that wanted to access online care programs did not have the equipment necessary to do so. SteppingStone responded by obtaining the needed equipment and providing it to

clients, slowly at first and then more broadly.



*"It isn't as simple as just purchasing laptops and giving them to interested clients. We need to match the correct device for each client addressing ease of use, connectivity and language. A few participants were given laptops, a few more, Fire tablets. We are now distributing GrandPads, which are the best fit for most of our clients because they are easy to use and can be set up in multiple languages including Chinese." Daniel Gallagher, Executive Director.*

Each Center implemented this program as was best for their

clients. For the purpose of this newsletter, we look at one Center, Presentation Day Health, which is located at 301 Ellis Street in the Tenderloin neighborhood. Multiple staff members are engaged in helping their participants get online, but leading that effort are Anna Wu, Social Worker and Janice Lau, Social Work Assistant.

*"We developed a list of participants we thought would benefit from receiving a GrandPad and I called them. Many were intimidated by the technology, saying that they could not do it, that they were "too stupid" to use a computer. I assured them they could do it and that I would be there to help them as much as they needed and gradually they agreed to try. These conversations were all in Chinese, which is the primary language of most of our participants. I created a step-by-step instruction sheet in Chinese on how to access our ZOOM classes for clients. If they get stuck, they call me and we go through the process again." Janice Lau, Assistant Social Worker.*



Anna Wu, the Center's Social Worker, remembers some participant that were eager try.

*"I had some participants that were eager to try to get online. They were really bored and being affected by the COVID isolation orders, so they wanted to reconnect to other people. Helping them get online made that possible." Anna Wu, Social Worker.*

In most cases Janice or Anna helped participants set up their devices. Sometimes this was done at their homes

using doorstep visits, but recently it has occurred at the Center where participants are attending again under strict limitations. Other Presentation Center staff assist in this process, particularly when other language skills are needed. One successful effort to get Korean-speaking participants online was facilitated by Young Lim, one of the Center's Program Aides who is fluent in that language.

Once participants are online, many continue to need support.

*"Of course clients call me every day needing help with getting online or accessing ZOOM. Even with the easy to use GrandPads and all our instruction, the process is challenging for them and their caregivers. But they keep trying, which is exactly what we want them to do. Some clients have regained a sense of independence after getting online and are proud to have done so."* Janie Lau, Assistant Social Worker.

*"I have seen a number of participants really become engaged again, not just with SteppingStone classes, but beyond that. Several are using WeChat, which is a social networking platform in Chinese. Others are enjoying listening to music, including one client that is a fan of Chinese opera."* Anna Wu, Social Worker.

Presentation Center currently offers two Body Dynamic Classes, one Tai Chi class and one Theraband class every week. Twenty participants have been provided devices, mostly GrandPads, but also Fire Tablets and an iPad. The program is continuing to expand providing devices to additional clients that need them.

The model of the program rollout at Presentation Day Health is just one example of SteppingStone's agency wide effort help our participants get online. All four Centers are providing this support for their clients, each with a different approach to best meet the need as they see it.

While the program was being implemented at the Centers, SteppingStone Executive Director Daniel Gallagher joined with other organizations in advocating for increased attention from the City of San Francisco to address the digital divide. This effort was led by the Coalition of Agencies Serving the Elderly (CASE) and was successful in securing \$600,000 to meet this need. These funds are helping seniors get equipment and support across San Francisco through several agencies including SteppingStone, which received forty GrandPads from the San Francisco Department of Disability and Aging and the Community Living Campaign for our participants.



*"The challenge of helping seniors access care and other programs online is not going away, even when the pandemic is over. SteppingStone wants to continue to offer online services for clients that cannot attend their Center for some reason and I am sure other agencies want to continue their online services as well. The future is helping seniors get the support they need to stay engaged and connected, in person and online, so we will continue to help our participants with each endeavor insofar as they want."* Daniel Gallagher, Executive Director.

*"Keeping our participants engaged and not isolated is vital to their health. Helping them do that online is one way to do this, connecting them not only to SteppingStone services, but beyond." Janice Lau, Assistant Social Worker.*

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Photos: **(Top)** Janice Lau, Assistant Social Worker at Presentation Center helping participant with GrandPad.

**(Middle )** Anna Wu, Social Worker at Presentation Center, working with participant on GrandPad.

**(Bottom)** Daniel Gallagher, SteppingStone's Executive Director

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SteppingStone Health | 930 Fourth St | San Francisco, CA | 415-974-6784