

Senior Citizens Advisory Council

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TO: Orange County Board of Supervisors

FROM: Orange County Senior Citizens Advisory Council (SCAC)

RE: **Immediate Action - Technology Request for Orange County Senior Citizens**

The Orange County Senior Citizens Advisory Council is charged with the responsibility of advising the Orange County Board of Supervisors and Office on Aging on matters affecting Senior Citizens in Orange County. The 40-member council is comprised of volunteer citizens, local elected officials, representatives of health care and supportive service provider organizations, persons with leadership experience, and the general public. (source: ocgov.com)

Orange County Senior Citizens are the only age group that is growing as a proportion of the population, while all other age groups are shrinking. The growth rate in Orange County is greater than the rest of the nation. It is anticipated that in the next 20 years, 1 in 4 Orange County residents will be age 65 or older. (source: 2019 American Communities Survey)

ACTION SUMMARY:

Even before Covid-19, the SCAC Executive Board was aware of the multitude of problems created by the **Senior Digital Divide** and looked towards technology for solutions. The SCAC Technology Committee was created to explore both the challenges facing seniors in the functioning of their daily lives, and the solutions to present to the Orange County Board of Supervisors.

Clearly, one of the solutions has to do with decreasing the **Senior Digital Divide** where seniors are divided into two groups - the haves and the have-nots.

To mitigate the challenges in order to decrease isolation, and increase access to services and information SCAC is requesting the Orange County Board of Supervisors take immediate action on these three items to:

1. **Provide technology for at least 2500 people.** The Connections, Health, Aging and Technology (CHAT) State project is providing Orange County Seniors with 300 iPad setups. We request that this program be available for at least 2200 more seniors. COVID-19 related Federal funding can be used towards the purchase and set-up of the iPads. Mental Health funding can also be accessed because of the strong correlation between

SCAC Board

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mental/emotional well-being and isolation prevention. 2500 is a low-end estimate derived as a percentage of the older adults that had to call the OC Health Care Agency for a Covid vaccination appointment instead of making an appointment online because they did not have access to technology. We also know that City staffs at City owned and operated Senior Centers reached out to their clients to assist with making vaccine appointments as well; this additional number is not available.

2. Purchase a **Get Set Up subscription** for all Orange County Seniors, a quantity of 42,000 to 50,000 seats. 42,000 class seats purchased at \$2.35 per class seat is \$98,700 for the first year. **Get Set Up** provides “how to use technology” classes in addition to 350 classes on a variety of topics including, health & wellness, aging in place, social connections, financial planning, communication, business & entrepreneurship, art, travel, and technology.

Engaging in learning reduces isolation, enhances cognitive health and overall well-being.

Learning how to use technology provides access to services, support, and necessary information. As cited in the Orange County Strategic Plan on Aging, health outcomes associated with telehealth include reduced mortality, improved quality of life, reduced hospital admissions, and better disease self-management skills.

3. Create an **Orange County Broadband Benefit Program**. Connectivity is key to access technology, services, and information. Barriers to connectivity increase the chasm created by the **Senior Digital Divide**. The 6 month Federal Emergency Broadband Benefit Program does not meet the continued need of Orange County Senior Citizens.

SCAC requests that action be taken on these above outlined items while one time COVID-19 funding is available, and supplement funding as necessary.

Why these action items so important to Orange County Senior Citizens:

The Need

One of the most important things facing seniors is isolation and loneliness. Seniors have always had the challenges that occur as they live alone and have significant losses including family, friends, illness, and hearing problems.

Unfortunately, this has been exacerbated during Covid-19. The very restrictions that protected them from physical problems set the stage for mental problems. According to a University of Michigan poll on healthy aging, 56% of older adults said they felt isolated in June 2020.

Quantifying the problem: According to Margaret Bredehoff, DrPH, Deputy Agency Director – Public Health Services, OC Health Care Agency, to date they have supported 6500 inbound calls looking for COVID vaccine support in terms of connection. Seniors who made this call did so because they did not have computer access.

Older adults are disproportionately excluded from communication technologies. Only 40% of older adults use smartphones, and that rate declines to 17% among adults age 80 plus.

Internet use is slightly higher, but more than a quarter of older adults lack access to the internet. A majority of older adults say they need help setting up digital devices. We know that more than 2 of every 5 Medicare beneficiaries who live in their homes do not have access to a laptop computer with a high-speed connection. More than a quarter also do not have a smartphone or other digital device that could fill the gap.

The disparity created by the **Senior Digital Divide** shines a bright light on the fact that a public health crisis becomes an information crisis for older adults.

Quality of the problem: The problem is serious. Loneliness can be as deadly as smoking or obesity, according to a Brigham Young University study. The serious and dangerous health issues include:

- Stress.
- depression
- Unhealthy habits such as smoking, drinking in excess, and neglecting exercise.
- Cognitive decline A study by the Rush Institute for Healthy Aging noted that the risk of Alzheimer's nearly doubled in lonely adults and mental decline was faster.
- Increased elder abuse
- Pessimism – isolated seniors tend to predict their lives getting worse.
- Lack of access to health care via tele-medicine.
- Suicide – The leading demographic for suicide is senior males.

SOLUTIONS

Connections, Health, Aging and Technology (CHAT) project:

The California Department of Aging (CDA) has been working collaboratively with workgroups of Area Agency on Aging (AAA) directors, the California Department of Technology, and other stakeholders on strategies to bridge the digital divide, and address social isolation for older Californians, people with disabilities and caregivers. This includes forming public/private partnerships to identify and leverage federal CARES Act funding. The CHAT project is to distribute at least 4,000 iPads with data plans and customized onboarding and technical support. To help seniors, research must be done on the cost/unit to ascertain the cost of increasing the CHAT iPads from 300 – thousands for Orange County. The purpose of the project is to mitigate loneliness and isolation for older adults, providing them with greater access to resources and information. We simply must do that for more than 300 seniors.

California is receiving 4,000 iPads and only 300 are coming to Orange County. This is not enough. SCAC strongly encourages the Board of Supervisors to investigate additional funding sources to continue increasing the numbers in the CHAT project and to provide financial support for this and other projects after the rescue money is gone. The estimated cost of each iPad device including data plan is \$995.00, for a total investment of \$2,189,000.00

GetSetup

GetSetup is a platform that will bridge the Senior Digital Divide by connecting Orange County's seniors with live, online lessons about frequently used tech programs and services, including mobile banking, telehealth options, online grocery, and prescription shopping & delivery, preparing for Medicare enrollment, using LinkedIn, finding online exercise classes and more.

All courses are taught in real-time, online by a GetSetup Instructor -- not just a recorded video -- and involve interactive "learn by doing" instruction for participants. GetSetup Instructors are seasoned, retired educators who have been retrained to teach essential tech services, apps, programs. To provide this service throughout Orange County to interested older adults, we recommend that 42,000 to 50,000 seats be provided to Orange County Seniors. 42,000 class seats purchased at \$2.35 per class seat is \$98,700 for the first year. For example, here is the Sacramento area AAA website that features Get Set Up free of charge: www.agencyonaging4.org

The Emergency Broadband Benefit Program:

This Federal program is an example of what is needed but, unfortunately, it is only a 6-month program. Broadband providers that service Southern California offer struggling households monthly discounts of up to \$50 on qualifying internet plans. The discounts are made possible through the Federal Communications Commission's \$3.2 billion Emergency Broadband Benefit Program. This program indicates the fact that the government understands the needs SCAC has identified, but it barely touches the surface of the need and does not meet the long-term goals of serving Orange County Seniors. It must not be considered the total solution. Here is what it will do.

Future Actions

Conduct a demographic study for Orange County that highlights "The Senior Digital Divide." The California State University Fullerton's Center for Demographic Research states that there is a need for more data in this area. Yet the use of and the lack of communication with a computer will not decrease soon.

Market the programs with a public service campaign, non-profit organizations, brochures in public utility statements.

Pursue a public/private partnership with broadband providers and/or tech non-profits targeting seniors to provide reduced cost tablets for the "missing middle" seniors that would not qualify for any programs or establish an interest free loan program.

BENEFITS

Taking action on SCAC's recommendations will greatly benefit Orange County Seniors and help them to live an active life with connections to family, friends, medical professionals. By connecting OC Seniors to technology, we establish OC as an age friendly place.

Benefits include:

- Decrease depression
 - Postpone the depression that often comes from isolation and loneliness.
 - Promote mental stimulation & entertainment
 - Strengthen relationships with family and friends
- Delay cognitive decline
 - Mental stimulation -watching videos, games, learning
- Promote physical health
 - Medical information

- Appointments with doctors (Tele-health)
- Physical fitness
- Communicating with doctors & pharmacy
- Monitoring medical conditions
- Prescription refills
- Safety
 - Calling for help
 - Elder Abuse Awareness Education
 - Well Checks
- Socialization
 - Learn new things & make new friends while doing so
 - Club and Organization newsletters and websites
- Convenience helps seniors be independent
 - Shopping for food & other items to be delivered
 - Online bill pay
 - Access to information

SCAC looks forward to working together with the Orange County Board of Supervisors in bringing these much -needed technology components to connect OC Seniors.

Connection brings hope!