COMMUNITY CARE IN THE TIME OF CORONA:
A RESOURCE TO NONPROFITS TRANSFORMING IN-PERSON SERVICE TO VIRTUAL SUPPORT

Non-profit organizations, particularly those built around in-service support programming, need to find ways to dramatically transform our service delivery model for the duration of mandatory social distancing orders—and most likely, beyond.

While initially secondary to in-person programming, virtual space—whether via phone calls, video conferencing, websites, and other digital media—has now become the only safe route through which we can safely offer our communities resources and support.

We pulled this guide together to support fellow non-profits, hoping that what we cobbled together and the lessons we’ve learned may help you speed your process of pivoting to offering community support online, if you’re considering it or underway.

At a time when people seem to be finding more creative and beautiful ways to support each other every day, we also take our cue from the people who have been working on these systems for generations. This isn’t a one-time change; it’s an opportunity for a permanent culture shift toward more accessibility, accountability, and care for everyone in our community.

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WHO WE ARE, WHAT HAPPENED HERE, AND WHAT WE DID

- For over 20 years, Our Family Coalition has served LGBTQI+ families and prospective parents/caregivers in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond, with support programming such as informational workshops, playgroups, support groups, large community-building events. We also provide LGBTQI+ - inclusive education and anti-bias trainings to school communities and child-serving professionals statewide.

- Coronavirus, or COVID-19 emerged in the San Francisco Bay Area at the end of January, 2020, initially in limited locales and traceable to overseas travel. By mid-March, every Bay Area county had reported cases not traceable to overseas travel, confirming we had begun local “community spread” of the virus.

- On March 5, 2020, we made the difficult decision to transition as much support work as we could to an online format, so as to enable as many people as possible to participate without risk to their health. The day following that, Bay Area schools began to temporarily shut down, first school by school, then district by district. Finally, 12 days from when we pivoted to virtual service delivery, most Bay Area counties called for a “shelter in place” on the part of all residents, for all but essential needs (food, medicine). The state followed soon thereafter.

- Our pivot to virtual: we committed to transforming as much as we could as fast as we could to a virtual format. Just a few of the many services we offer lent themselves to virtual delivery: support groups felt most needed, and next thereafter informational workshops. The playgroups and large community-building events.

- We had been watching international and U.S. disease movement, and had begun internal dialog about our organizational pandemic protocol. For this reason, just four days after we announced temporary suspension of our in-person service delivery, we had our first virtual programs up and running. The Monday following our Friday announcement we held our first support groups online, and by the next week we had a dozen groups on the calendar.

- Our first month of virtual groups include both old and new: groups we’d been running for years, ones we created to support people through this immediate crisis period, and three ongoing weekly “drop-in” chats. Two weeks after we pivoted to online service delivery, we were able to offer our first informational workshop.

- Moving forward, for the duration of the state- and region-wide shelter-in-place, we’re looking at all our core supports and re-envisioning them as either informal online groups, one-time
workshops (featuring a guest expert resource, with us acting as EMCEE / host), and more. We’re working on creative ways to take our fundraising gala virtual (a problem facing many of us during event season) and integrate remote work culture as part of our new normal.

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**PRIORITIZING WHAT TO VIRTUALIZE, ISSUES TO KEEP IN MIND**

There’s no element of our work that feels “optional.” Members of LGBTQI+ communities already feel isolation in disproportionate measure, so we knew that social distancing and the interruption of in-person support would magnify that, intolerably. We needed to rapidly replace as much as we could, but only some work lends itself well to online delivery.

- **Programming that lends itself to virtual format:**
  - Adult participants
  - Support groups
  - Informational workshops

- **Programming ill-suited to virtual format:**
  - Parent / caregiver - child interactive activities or playgroups
  - Larger community-building social events

- **Addressing novel programming and support needs:**
  - We have held two open community calls, just to field peoples’ concerns.
  - We’re running a group in April, “Parenting/supporting healthy development amidst COVID-19,” expressly designed to address hypertopical concerns of our families; it’s likely to be the first of many such.

- **The spike in anti-AAPI racist attacks demands specific attention:**
  - The spike in racist assaults of AAPI community members calls for explicit and unequivocal condemnation, as well direct support of AAPI members of our community.
    - It’s important that condemnation of anti-AAPI racist attacks are part of all outbound messaging, countering with a message of extra support to AAPI members of our community.

- **Virtual programming isn’t just about crisis response, it’s about accessibility:**
  - Virtual service delivery vastly magnifies accessibility, and those concerns pre- and post-dates Coronavirus:
    - Virtual support has been championed by disability justice advocates for years.
- Trans people who experience dysphoria when they leave the house have been talking about virtual support as a gender justice issue for years.
- Parents who have a hard time finding childcare have been talking about virtual support as a family values issue for years.

- Some further **positives** to keep in mind:
  - This dramatic time can offer some opportunities: **we can reach new members** of our own communities who were unable to physically get to our in-person services.
  - Depending on capacity and funding, we can expand service delivery to whole **new geographic areas**, limited only by our ability to get the word out.

- Some unique **challenges** we face:
  - Re-tooling our grant deliverables
    - We had to contact our grantors almost immediately, **confirming their understanding** of our suspension of in-person service delivery (before it became mandatory on a city and state level).
    - Clarity needs to be established about appropriate adjustments to deliverables and reporting deadlines— from both the grantors’ standpoints, around expectations, and the grantees’, around capacity.
    - Virtually all our family support programming is funded by city and county-based public grants; for this work, **complete participant information** is critical to our being able to track the most important data.

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**FIVE WAYS TO DIALOG WITH COMMUNITY ONLINE**

- **Making static web pages** dynamic
  - **Pluses**
    - You have a one-stop location to direct people to which is open-ended: you can collect links to other, additional pages you make as needed, as well as to programming and resources on- and offsite.
    - A web page is the easiest to access on the part of the online community: no need to download additional software. Can also be accessed by anyone w/out invitation or prior knowledge, & thus is more widely shareable.
    - If an organization has a blog on their site, this provides an easy, accessible, and updateable location for such information.
  - **Minuses**
    - Not every organization has easy access to their static web page content.
Deciding where it goes may entail a review of the site’s information architecture, especially if there’s not already a resource page to add to.

- **Conference calls**
  - **Pluses**
    - Accessible to anyone with a phone line.
    - Doesn’t entail additional software on the part of participants, other than making an outgoing call.
  - **Minuses**
    - Depending on how the call time and number are shared, privacy may be an issue (particularly without visual cues provided by video).
    - Can be easier for participants to feel cut off (especially if most are on video).
    - Multi-tasking &/or drifting away is much easier.

- **Video conferences** *(w/ audio-only phone in options)*
  - **Pluses**
    - Greater sense of community among participants, since the visual cues add a layer of emotional and social connectedness.
    - Especially well suited to informational workshops, since video conferences also include the capacity to convey information via slides or photographs, or screen sharing.
    - The content can usually be harvested and archived for future use on the part of the organization or others.
  - **Minuses**
    - Many video conference opportunities entail downloading proprietary software, which adds a tech-literacy related speed bump.
    - Videoconferences facilitated via social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitch, etc. (via livestream) are in effect content “owned” by those companies, and their business model is collect, commandeer, and sell user data and attention for profit—not to provide a quiet, customizable space for content you control.

- **Facebook private groups**
  - **Pluses**
    - Nearly 70% of Americans use Facebook, and three-quarters of these visit at least once a day, so “finding” your community is much easier than if you housed a dialog on your own site.
    - For those community members who are already on Facebook and use it as a primary communications and community-building tool, sharing information about a group among their friendship network is far easier.
Minuses

- Community members need a Facebook account to access it.
- As with Facebook Live as a video conferencing or workshop content delivery platform, organizations have no control over the context in which the groups are placed on the website (e.g. ads or other content running next to the video, ease of access, etc.).
- Facebook has the capacity to make that content easier or harder to find with the change of an algorithm. For instance, a tiny fraction of your page’s followers will be served up any given post of yours, based on algorithms designed to maximise profit rather than your access to your community.
- Because of the primarily social context of the videoconference there, users have a much higher likelihood of being lured away.

Online forums which you host

Pluses

- Numerous text-based forums (such as Mighty Networks) or video conferencing platforms (such as Crowdcast) are offering discounts right now and thus lowering the bars to entry (non-profits however usually enjoy discounts year-round).
- Whether you are using a text-based forum or using a video conferencing platform not embedded in a social media space, your organization owns the content outright.
- The context in which it’s displayed or served up is your own website, so you are keeping your community within your orbit or digital ecosystem, which itself then also enables you to be able to lead them to additional resources following the video, rather than the distraction of the commercial milieu like YouTube or Facebook.
- You can often have more control over the information you can gather about participants in advance, which can then support your grant supporting and additional community building.

Minuses

- Any new system entails educating staff on its adoption, and also requires some education of your community to use it.
- Any means of dialog that isn’t located in a social space where community members already are requires an independent marketing plan to raise awareness.
PRIVACY CONCERNS: HIPAA COMPLIANCE & MORE

- For many of us, our services must be HIPPA-compliant (the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, ensuring client privacy and security). Clarifying that our online groups were HIPAA-compliant was a non-negotiable.
- Because of the need to collect sufficiently detailed information upon registration (for our grants), and an equal need to ensure privacy (HIPAA-compliant degree), Facebook does not offer a sufficiently secure platform for our support groups and workshops.
- Video conferencing platforms can be HIPAA compliant, but you need to ensure you’re properly configured. Google and Zoom are two very common platforms.
  - Google suite
    - Our organization uses G-suite as a platform for our organizational email and shared cloud-based document storage, so that’s what we explored immediately.
    - G Suite incorporates necessary controls to ensure HIPAA compliance, but it’s possible to configure or use it in a way that violates HIPPA. (See this article for more.)
    - Google worked with us and our tech support to ensure we were configured properly, and could guarantee a secure, private virtual space for all our groups.
  - Zoom
    - Zoom is HIPPA-compliant, but at a certain fee-level ($200, at last check).

MANAGING THE PROCESS

- Exceptional times call for exceptional responses, so we have widened the range of staff (and potentially community members) we’ve called upon to facilitate groups and brainstorm workshops.
- Prepare for the unique demands of this sort of group facilitation:
  - Since conveying a sense of stability is key at this time, it’s extremely helpful to have familiar staff as facilitators.
  - Eight participants is often considered optimum for small groups that are held in person: neither too big nor too small, encouraging participation from a range of personalities. But this becomes nearly the maximum that an online group can manage before it devolves into a cacophony, or all the participants quietly uncertain of what’s next. Be mindful of what works best and be ready to adapt.
Protocol of video group facilitation is inherently challenging. It’s a foreign social space for many of us (at this early stage). Some useful tips:

■ Establishing ground rules or reminders about processes will go a long way to helping everyone get more comfortable with the space, and use it effectively and respectfully.
■ Remember to ask participants to “mute” themselves when they’re not talking, so their background noise doesn’t distract.
■ Remind participants to say their name before they speak, if it’s a phone conference, or if it’s a video conference and any participants are participating by phone.
■ Facilitation needs to be more active, insofar as we have fewer visual cues to go by, and more than one voice at a time usually mutes another (thus talking over one another quashes dialog more in this space than in person).
■ Participants can find a way to indicate they’re done talking, or even “call on” the next participant for a response, “popcorn”-style, if that’s appropriate for the topic.

Next steps: follow up with resources

Ensure that the group participants can find further information or resources referred to in the session. We don’t have the option of bringing “handouts,” so PDFs in an easy-to-find place have increased value. This is another example of the value of a dedicated Virtual or Coronavirus-specific landing page on your website.

GETTING THE WORD OUT, STAYING IN TOUCH

Ensure all outward-facing organizational communications support the change in service delivery and provide easy access to up-to-date programming information.

■ Programming calendar
■ Website content
■ Social media channels
■ Email marketing/ targeted e-blasts

A consistent digital landing page

Having a one-stop location that can stockpile your organization’s resources and programming helps simplify messaging: the one link can be used for a range of support modalities.

Additional considerations
○ Creating a **recognizable graphic identity** for virtual programming can help simplify the cues community members need to look for, & reinforce the change in status.

○ Many organizations are innovating very creative means of connecting with community members, so keep open to new ideas as every new email about virtual connectivity comes into your inbox, and be ready to modify your offerings as needed.

● Never underestimate the power of direct outreach.
  ○ **Following up with community members on the phone, one on one** is a classic, old-fashioned, low-tech way to ensure no one is feeling left behind, particularly if most of what your organization can do is deliver internet- and computer-dependent resources.
  ○ For people for whom staying at home may subject them to abuse or unsafe situations, try communicating through **Signal** - an encrypted texting app with the option to set messages to delete after a specified amount of time.