

Technology Innovations in Response to COVID-19 Service Delivery & Recovery



“...[P]rograms are scrambling to address the **new reality of a virtual workforce** by converting existing workforce development activities to online formats while planning to **maintain high quality services** for families and job satisfaction for employees.”

– National Child Welfare Workforce Institute¹

I. Introduction

CAAs have exemplified true creativity and commitment to serving people with low incomes in response to the pandemic, developing innovative uses of technology to maintain and improve programs. In the first 90 days alone, CAAs leveraged videoconferencing and other virtual communication platforms, online and smartphone applications, community collaboratives, private and public partnerships, and most importantly, the commitment and dedication of their staff to ensure that communities remain resilient and healthy during this period of increased need. The onset of the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020 forced Community Action Agencies (CAAs) to quickly assess their technology capacity so staff could follow safety guidelines without disrupting service delivery. Incorporating technology into agency practices is not always a seamless task. CAAs want and need to innovate, but funding for, knowledge of, and access to technology creates barriers to success. Agencies are addressing these challenges by learning and adapting new ways of working with technology to ensure services and resources continue to be available to those who critically need them.

II. The Issue/Key Findings

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, overnight CAAs around the country quickly transformed the way they did business in response to public health safety measures. Many CAAs began to engage in remote work which merited the use of web teleconferencing technology to engage in meetings and events, enhanced tools to enroll customers in services and engage in service delivery, and online teaching and learning tools for students and parents, particular children enrolled in Head Start or adults enrolled in workforce development training program.

The increased demand for technology integration brings challenges for CAAs. The challenges include the need to purchase new mobile equipment for staff and customers, the need for new or updated technological software, systems, and protocols to support emerging needs. For the first time, agencies find themselves navigating new levels

of cyber security, technology aptitude barriers, concerns about confidentiality protocols, and added pressures to go beyond normal work hours or personal resources to serve clients.² Legal standards under HIPAA have been altered to allow health professionals to use tools that are not usually accepted, such as virtual communication software.³

An added concern especially for CAAs who serve customers in rural areas is the lack of access to broadband. Especially during the current crisis, this barrier has left communities and states to re-think investments in broadband infrastructure. In the meantime, CAAs have been adaptive and innovative to respond to the urgent needs of their customers.

III. Community Action Agency Innovations

Agencies in the Community Action Network are navigating these moments and embodying the mission of helping people and changing lives in a concrete way. Hampton Roads Community Action Program (HRCAP) serves residents living in the southeast region of Virginia. Despite COVID-19 safety mandates, HRCAP did not stop providing services to their community. Instead, HRCAP adapted quickly and instituted these technological innovations to continue service delivery:

Education. HRCAP's Head Start teachers curated learning curricula for parents to use with their children at home while centers were closed. The curricula were packaged for parents into age-appropriate, practical activity guides that promote engagement and learning.⁴ The guides were made easily available through HRCAP's website and Facebook page.⁵

Case Management. Many CAAs have switched to phone calls to interact with customers, but HRCAP has taken a step further to sustain their Two-Generation/Whole Family Approach Pilot Program. Two-Gen/Whole Family Approach approaches require collaborating with children and parents simultaneously to support the entire family.⁶ Using an online video conferencing system, the organization contracted with a Licensed Clinical Social Worker to provide virtual mental health sessions to its whole family approach cohort. Parents participate in Peer Support Groups as well as individual counseling via Zoom.

Administration. Online customer tracking systems, such as EmpowOR, are designed to assist organizations like Community Action Agencies that manage multiple programs,

services, and funding streams.⁷ HRCAP has adapted its administrative practices by using this type of software to securely process emergency payments to customers experiencing hardship due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Wayne Metropolitan Community Action Agency serves the city of Detroit and Wayne County, Michigan. Nearly 23% of Wayne County's population is living in poverty, which exceeds the national poverty level by 11.4%, and the state rate by 9.5 %. Knowing that in-person appointments would not be feasible during this time, Wayne Metro staff developed an online universal application that clients could access 24/7. The primary focus for the online application included ease of access for the customers: the application takes 4-5 minutes on average to complete. Within the first three weeks of launching, Wayne Metro received 8,000 applications covering 21,000 total service requests. To keep this in perspective, Wayne Metro normally serves about 35,000 requests per year.

Lake County Lifeline, a CAA that serves Lake County, Ohio, leveraged an existing relationship with a local school district to ensure students experiencing poverty were not left behind as education suddenly went virtual. The staff at Lifeline worked with the Painesville City School District to offer mobile hotspots using the school's van fleet. Vans moved throughout the city at regularly scheduled times to allow students to connect to the internet in order to download and upload homework assignments. Because of this quick action to meet a need, an average of 78 users were able to access WiFi each day within the first month of this technological innovation.

IV. Conclusion

Technology innovations will continue to evolve as CAAs learn effective strategies. The availability of the [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act of 2020](#) supplemental funds have enabled agencies make quick technological adaptations to ensure the safety of staff and customers. In many cases, the creativity used has sustained the vital access to services that are needed by families and communities who have struggled during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though there have been obstacles, the Community Action Network has been flexible and innovative and continues to move customers forward through their technological advancements and integrations in this era.

V. Resources

- [Data in the Time of COVID-19](#) Open Data Watch, updated November 13, 2020. Open Data Watch has put together over 500 links of helpful articles they have found since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic focused on opening, sharing and using data, and highlights challenges associated with data usage.
- [Guidelines for Virtual Monitoring of Children, their Families and Residential Care Facilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) Global Social Service Workforce Alliance. The Interagency Technical Guidance on child protection during the pandemic can help those working with children and families to stay informed about child protection risks as programs and case workers maintain regular contact with children and families they serve.
- [Home Visit or Friendly Chat? What Makes a Virtual Home Visit a Visit?](#) Healthy Families America, April 2020. Healthy Families America sites are continuing to make families a priority despite barriers during the pandemic, often through phone and video calls. The Healthy Families America Best Practice Standards are a resource for those seeking guidance in the area of home visiting.
- [Nonprofits and Coronavirus, COVID-19: Technology Tools for Remote Work and Events](#) National Council of Nonprofits, 2020. This page is updated with information and resources that nonprofits can use to respond to COVID-19. It is crucial to keep open lines of communications and share information and resources from credible sources, such as the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- [Nonprofit Technology Resources](#) TechImpact, 2020. The technology learning center provides research, insights, and assessment tools to help you solve challenges related to topics such as fundraising software, data management, program and service delivery, and marketing.
- [Social Service Workers Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19](#) Global Social Services Workforce Alliance, 2020. A new resource, Social Service Workforce Safety and Wellbeing during the COVID-19 Response, provides guidance to support the social service workforce as they serve children, families, and communities during the pandemic. This online webpage also includes COVID-19 resources specific to mental health as well as topics such as case management, service provision to vulnerable populations, communications, and trainings.
- [Supporting the Virtual Workforce Webinar Series](#) National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, July-November 2020. This series provides a platform for child welfare leaders to discuss learning and share best practices.

The Community Action COVID-19 Resource Series

1. [Applying the Equity Lens to COVID-19 Response and Recovery](#)
2. [A Trauma-Informed Agency Response to COVID-19](#)
3. [Applying Lessons Learned from Past Crisis Responses](#)
4. [Technology Innovations in Response to COVID-19 Service Delivery and Recovery](#)
5. [Leveraging Partnerships in COVID-19 Response and Recovery](#)
6. [Whole Family Approach Responses to COVID-19](#)

¹ 2020 Webinar Series, National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, July-November 2020. <https://ncwwi.org/index.php/webinar/national-webinar-series>

² Barsky, Allan. *Ethical Exceptions for Social Workers in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Physical Distancing*. The New Social Worker Magazine, White Hat Communications, March 2020. <https://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/ethics-articles/ethical-exceptions-social-workers-in-light-of-covid-19-pandemic-physical-distancing/>

³ Lazzarotti, Joseph J. *HIPAA Privacy Rule Waiver, Other Medical Information Questions During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, The National Law Review. March 17, 2020. <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/hipaa-privacy-rule-waiver-other-medical-information-questions-during-covid-19>

⁴ Hampton Roads Community Action Program Head Start learning curricula package for parents and children, 2020. <https://3rup6y218p313qfb2vkowb9q-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Early-Head-Start-Educational-Package.pdf>

⁵ *The Hampton Roads Community Action Program Responds to COVID-19 Pandemic*, Hampton Roads Community Action Program, 2020. <https://hrcapinc.org/covid-19-update/>

⁶ *What is 2Gen?* Ascend, The Aspen Institute. <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/two-generation/what-is-2gen/>

⁷ *Solutions, Community Action Agencies*. Empower by CSST Software. 2020. <https://www.empoworbycsst.com/solutions/community-action-agencies>

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