



# ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

## SONOMA COUNTY

**Start Date: February 2023**

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*“[This program] gives the clients more independence by knowing how to navigate the web. It allows them to be informed and not need to depend on someone else.”*

*—Araceli Gutierrez, La Luz Center*



# THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN SONOMA COUNTY

California's population of adults over 60 is growing faster than any other age group and is [projected to increase from 16% in 2010 to 25% by 2030](#). In Sonoma County specifically, adults aged 60 and older currently make up 27% of the population, a figure anticipated to reach 33% by 2030.

As this older adult population grows, so does the need for programs that address one of their most pressing challenges: **social isolation**. This issue is especially critical for

those who are homebound, immigrants, or whose adult children have moved far away.

**The internet provides a lifeline for staying connected with family and friends, regardless of distance.** However, many older adults are unfamiliar with technology, which can leave them vulnerable to profound loneliness, thereby significantly impacting their mental and emotional well-being.

Moreover, without digital proficiency, older adults face the risk of being **left behind** as essential services and opportunities increasingly shift online. From scheduling medical appointments to applying for government benefits, digital skills are now crucial for accessing resources and support. They're also vital for economic stability, enabling older adults to seek part-time work, manage finances, and access discounts.

Bridging digital gaps is essential to ensure that all older adults can thrive in an increasingly connected world.

Every two years, the Sonoma County government develops a [Master Plan for Aging](#) to serve as a roadmap to improve the health and well-being of the County's swelling population of older adults, people with disabilities, and their caregivers. The 2022 and 2024 plans specifically recommend **expanded digital skills training** and resources, including more **language offerings, device distributions, and orientation sessions**.

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*“I really liked walking away from class feeling more knowledgeable and safer online. I learned something new in each lesson. The teachers are very patient and will spend time answering all your questions. I love these classes!”*

*—Tina, 70*



# COMMUNITY TECH NETWORK OVERVIEW

Community Tech Network (CTN) is a nonprofit organization that has been working to bridge the digital divide since 2008. CTN primarily serves older adults and marginalized communities, providing them with devices and **culturally-appropriate digital skills training in multiple languages**. Additionally, CTN offers **tech support** and assistance in signing up for **affordable home internet**.

Classes and workshops are often held in public

libraries, low-income housing developments, community centers, schools, and social service agencies.

To expand its impact, CTN also developed **online courses designed to support other organizations** and individuals as they launch or enhance their own digital equity initiatives. CTN licenses **multilingual technology class curricula** with lesson plans and workbooks as well.



## PANDEMIC RESPONSE & PROGRAM EXPANSION

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, it became essential for people to learn how to use technology to manage crucial daily tasks—such as ordering medicine and groceries, scheduling telehealth appointments, and staying connected with loved ones. However, with lockdowns in effect, attending in-person computer classes was impossible.

In response, CTN launched [Home Connect](#), offering virtual, one-on-one technology training in multiple languages. After participants received a tablet and workbook by mail, a CTN instructor would call them to guide

them through steps like turning on the device and enabling screen-sharing for future classes.

While in-person classes have since resumed, CTN continues to offer **remote training**, enabling the organization to effectively reach **homebound learners, individuals with disabilities, and residents of rural communities** who may find it difficult to attend in-person sessions.

In this way, Home Connect allows folks to participate comfortably from home, sometimes with assistance from a family member or caregiver.

*“I work in the affordable housing sector. While some residents have internet connectivity and devices, it is not uncommon for many to have neither due to their low incomes and educational needs.”*

*—Mary Lockhart, Burbank Housing*

*“I wanted to learn some new skills, especially related to technology, to keep up to date in hopes of getting a new part-time job. I was also able to apply for food stamps online after this class and now receive them!”*

*—Maria, 68*

# ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY (ATT) BACKGROUND

The California Department of Aging (CDA) administers programs to support older adults (60+), adults with disabilities (18+), family caregivers, and residents in long-term care facilities.

As one of its duties, the CDA oversees 33 Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) across the state, which directly manage a wide range of services, including many that help older adults and adults with disabilities live independently.

Although the CDA recognized that older adults and adults with disabilities were adopting technology at lower rates than other groups, digital inclusion did not become a priority until the pandemic created an **epidemic of loneliness**. Multipurpose senior centers and day centers were closed and many older adults and adults with disabilities were socially—and emotionally—isolated.

In response, the CDA launched three pilot programs to reduce social isolation through digital interventions: Connections, Health, Access and Technology (CHAT), Digital Connections, and Access to Technology (ATT).

The first two programs provided devices with data plans to individuals who had been referred by their local AAA. Some technology

training was also available to program recipients.

However, the third initiative—**Access to Technology**—offered grants directly to County Human Services Agencies. A number of counties then partnered with their local AAA to administer the program, allowing the AAAs to **address digital inclusion needs in ways that best fit their communities**.

This flexible funding allowed AAAs to take diverse actions, such as upgrading public computer labs, establishing tech support hotlines, hiring technology instructors, partnering with service providers like CTN to offer digital skills classes, distributing free laptops or tablets, or subsidizing home internet plans—whatever was needed to help community members get online.

The Access to Technology program was funded through the **Home and Community Based Services (HCBS)**, a Medicaid initiative that helps people receive care in their homes or communities. The program received a temporary boost under the federal government's **American Rescue Plan Act**.

All funding needed to be fully utilized by September 30, 2024.

*“One participant learned how to apply for jobs, which was a huge win for us.”*

*—Steven Vera, Disability Services and Legal Center*



# SONOMA COUNTY'S ATT GRANT

The Sonoma County Area Agency on Aging chose to use its Access to Technology funding to hire Community Tech Network. This was not the first collaboration between CTN and Sonoma County, as CTN had previously served as a lead contractor for the County's CHAT program.

Under the ATT project, CTN offered **free tablets and technology training** to help the County's older adults and individuals with disabilities get online.

**Classes were available both in-person and remotely, and all devices came with a complementary six-month data plan.**

In order to identify potential program participants, CTN partnered with Senior Centers, nonprofits, affordable housing providers, and government and social agencies in Sonoma County. These partner

organizations would be responsible for referring interested community members to CTN for virtual technology training through Home Connect. They could offer their facilities for CTN instructors to provide in-person group classes.

To ensure the program's sustainability, CTN also **provided digital navigator training** to the staff and volunteers of the partner organizations. The training equipped them with the skills to teach technology to adult learners, guide community members towards low-cost home internet options, and provide ongoing tech support.

Such capacity building **allowed digital equity knowledge and resources to stay within the local communities** so that organizations could continue with digital inclusion efforts even after the ATT grant period ended.

*“Being able to get individual help with my specific problems was amazing. The instructor was able to tailor the lessons for each person and what they needed.”*

*—Dana, 69*

# WORKFLOW



The workflow consisted of a coordinated effort between the Sonoma County Area Agency on Aging (AAA), local community partners, CTN, KBS Mobility, and the learners to be served.

## OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT

Once the program’s initial planning phase was complete, the next step was to identify and recruit local organizations to serve as partners.

The Sonoma County Department of Health and Human Services, which supports services for older adults, people with disabilities, family caregivers, and residents in long-term care facilities (including at its own facility), assisted CTN and the Sonoma County AAA in identifying potential partners.

The following organizations were initially selected to refer older adults and people with disabilities to the program:

- Cloverdale Senior Center
- Petaluma People Services Center
- Salvation Army Senior Activity Center, Santa Rosa
- Sebastopol Area Senior Center
- Silvercrest Senior Housing
- Sonoma County Council on Aging/Meals on Wheels
- West County Community Services: Russian River Senior Resource Center

Later, two additional organizations—La Luz and Graton Day Labor Center/Centro Laboral De Graton—joined to expand outreach to Spanish-speaking learners. The Disability Services & Legal Center also began offering the program to its clients a few months after CTN started accepting referrals. Additionally, EAH and Burbank Housing, two affordable housing nonprofits with previous experience working with CTN, eventually became partners.

Several Sonoma County government agencies, including Adult Protective Services (APS), Multipurpose Senior Service Programs (MSSP)/ Linkages Care Management, Public Authority IHSS Caregiver Registry, and the Sonoma Area Agency on Aging itself, also referred clients to the program.

CTN’s initial goal was to identify 10 referral partners. By the end of the program, there were **15 partners who referred learners to CTN’s virtual training**. Of these, **eight also offered their facilities for CTN to teach in-person classes<sup>1</sup>** to community members.

## **LEARNER REFERRAL**

Community Tech Network created promotional flyers, posters, newsletter articles, and other **marketing materials in English, Spanish, and Russian** for each of the partners to distribute, helping to **advertise the availability of free devices and technology classes** to their community members.

Each flyer listed a designated staff member from the partner organization as the primary contact. This contact person would meet with interested individuals, **assess eligibility**, and refer qualified participants to the classes using an online referral form.

CTN initially planned to serve 300 individuals but surpassed that target by enrolling 570 participants in the program.

## **DIGITAL SKILLS ASSESSMENT**

Once the partner organizations submitted the online referral form, a CTN instructor reached out to each learner in their preferred language to introduce the program. During this initial phone call, the instructor conducted a pre-training assessment to **evaluate the learner's comfort level with technology**, their existing skills, and their availability. This information was then used to create a personalized training plan tailored to each learner's specific needs and interests.

## **DEVICES**

Approved participants received an 8" Galaxy tablet with an activated SIM card, an unlimited data plan for six months, a stylus, and a case.

Everything was mailed directly to their home address from KBS Mobility, Community Tech Network's equipment shipping partner. **The devices were already configured in the learner's preferred language.**

Participants also received a **workbook which included basic instructions and exercises** that could be used to follow along with the classes, complete assignments, and practice on their own. Phil Schutt, a CTN instructor and program coordinator, says that many learners utilize their learner booklet to take notes during training.

These booklets were available in different languages and were designed by experienced CTN curriculum specialists to meet **different cultural needs**. For example, Spanish speakers often keep in touch with their loved ones through the messaging platform WhatsApp, whereas WeChat might be a more popular option for Chinese speakers. The workbooks included exercises and examples that were relevant to the students.

The package with the Learner's Booklet included a welcome letter with the instructor's name and contact information for the learner's convenience.

With **additional funding** that was received in June 2023, CTN was able to purchase 10.2" Galaxy tablets and iPad 9 devices for the last few months of the program so learners could have their choice of devices. The **larger screen** on the 10.2" Galaxy tablet was better for participants with vision and fine motor skill issues.

## **TRAINING**

Each learner was offered up to five hours of one-on-one, **personalized, virtual classes** in the language of their choice, **in-person group classes** with a CTN instructor at the location that referred them, and/or the opportunity to join **online group drop-in sessions** with CTN to receive ongoing support and advice.

### **Virtual Classes**

Instructors would call the learner over the phone and guide them through the process of turning on AnyDesk, a screen-sharing technology which was pre-installed on their tablet. **AnyDesk** allows the trainers to see the learner's screen (without being able to control it). Video conferencing on platforms like Zoom was also an option if learners already had some basic technology skills.

If a learner missed a scheduled class, the CTN instructor would make up to four attempts to contact them and reschedule. Referral partners also provided additional support in trying to follow up with learners who were unresponsive.

### **In-Person Classes**

CTN initially offered in-person classes with **small cohorts** of five to ten learners per location. The members of each cohort were expected to attend five sessions together over the course of five weeks. Once the cohort in a given location completed its training, a new cohort could begin.

However, the program quickly **evolved into weekly, one-hour drop-in lessons**. Participants did not need to attend each

session. Rather, people who were referred to the program could just attend a class whenever they wanted or felt like it was necessary throughout the year.

Says Schutt, *"There were a number of reasons it developed this way. Folks were busy and couldn't attend five straight lessons without missing one. Also, some people only wanted a lesson or two, whereas others needed constant reinforcement due to memory issues. Additionally, potential participants were being referred to the program constantly. So we were shipping tablets all the time. It was tough to tell someone they had to wait five weeks to attend a class until the next cohort began due to the timing of when they received their tablet."*

Some partner organizations, such as the Russian River Senior Center, hosted weekly classes throughout nearly the entire program. The Council on Aging also maintained a full year of weekly lessons.

Learner attendance varied—some program participants attended only a few classes, while others went for the entire year.

In total, CTN delivered more than 200 in-person group lessons in English and Spanish at the Cloverdale, COA, Burbank Housing, La Luz, Silvercrest, Sebastopol Senior Center, Petaluma People Services Center, EAH, and the Salvation Army locations.

## **ONGOING SUPPORT**

During the last lesson, instructors assessed each learner's digital skills to measure their progress. Customer satisfaction and program

evaluation surveys were also conducted.

As the program concluded, CTN also reached out to partner organizations to confirm whether they would continue to provide additional in-person services and support to the learners. All of the lead partners confirmed that they will continue offering digital skills classes in their communities beyond the program's end date.

Learners were also invited to attend CTN's virtual drop-in tech advice sessions and online

workshops for ongoing tech support. Weekly (Cantonese and Mandarin), biweekly (Spanish), and monthly (English) sessions are provided by CTN instructors and volunteers.

Additionally, CTN provided a map of public computer labs across the County where older adults could continue to get advice and support.



*“The most helpful aspects were the training materials and ongoing support [that CTN] provided to our clients. And Phil (a CTN instructor and program coordinator) is a gem.”*

*—Emily Heinzelman, Director of Senior Services,  
Crisis Support & Employment Services, West  
County Community Services*



# ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

## **BROADBAND CONNECTIVITY**

Securing affordable internet access for its community members was one of the program's primary goals. Asking clients about their home internet access helped identify candidates for the program and added another opportunity for engagement.

CTN provided six months of complimentary data plans for ATT learners while also assisting participants in finding affordable home internet services, ensuring continued access to their devices beyond the initial period.

Until the program was discontinued, CTN instructors informed learners of the **Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)**, which was a federally-funded program that offered eligible, low-income households discounts on their monthly internet bills. The instructors were available to **guide participants through the ACP application process or to assist them in exploring alternative low-cost internet options.**

## DIGITAL NAVIGATOR TRAINING

Digital navigator training was included among the services CTN provided to Sonoma County partners.

The [customized package](#) offered by CTN included:

- Access to Community Tech Network's [online capacity-building courses](#)
- Enrollment in a **community forum** to connect with other digital equity practitioners nationwide
- A **resource package** featuring sample forms, such as intake assessments
- Invitations to **debrief sessions** for asking questions and discussing the material
- The opportunity to **"shadow"** a CTN instructor during a technology class

Twenty individuals from six partner agencies participated in this digital navigator training.

## MARKETING SUPPORT

As previously mentioned, Community Tech Network developed **tailored promotional materials for each referral partner**, including

custom flyers, newsletter articles, and social media posts featuring their logos and contact information. When iPads became available, all promotional materials were updated to reflect the new offerings.

However, in addition to the initial program advertisements, CTN also provided other marketing support. For instance, CTN crafted a follow-up newsletter article for the Council on Aging, highlighting program outcomes and sharing impactful quotes from learners. In addition to print materials, CTN produced **video interviews** with partners and learners, which were shared across social media platforms to broaden outreach and engagement.

Furthermore, CTN showcased the stories of six Sonoma County learners and two referral agencies through its **blog and social media channels**, further amplifying the program's impact and personal success stories.

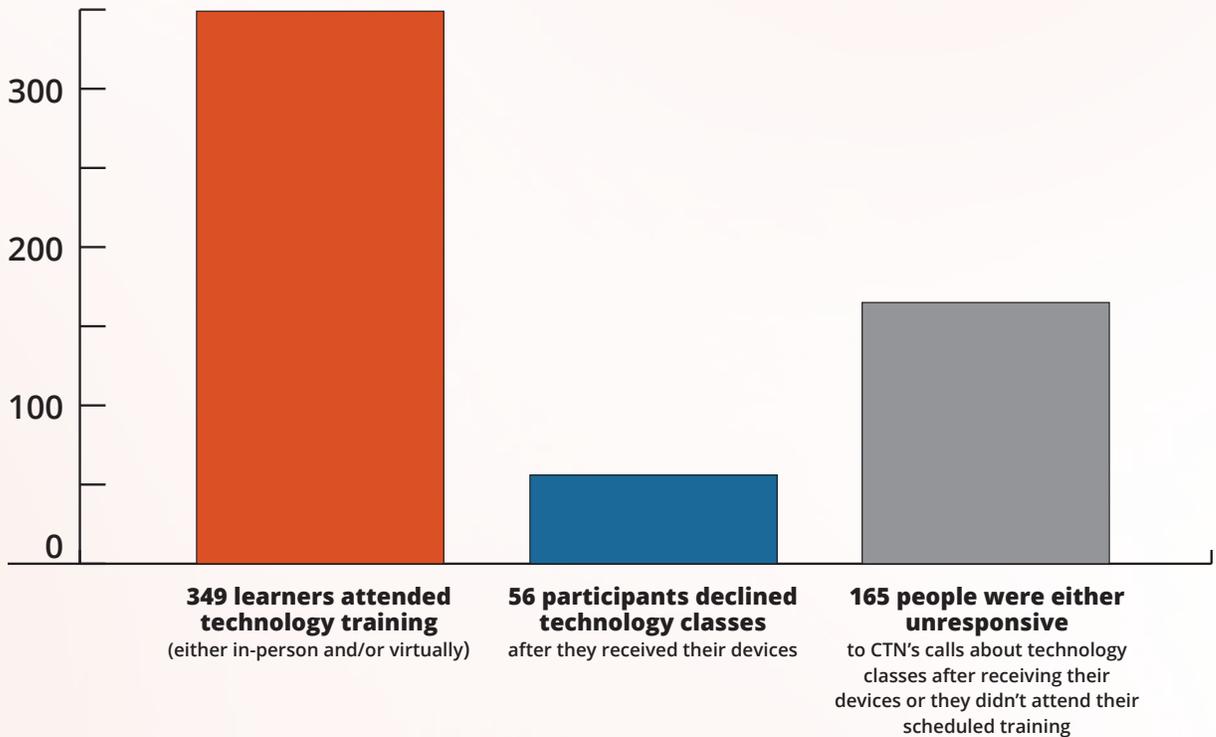
*“I now have access to  
online classes and can  
expand my professional  
credentials and return to  
the workforce remotely.”*

*—Maria, 68*

# RESULTS AND IMPACT

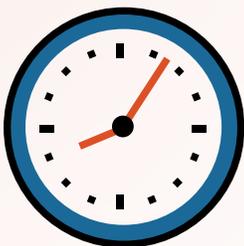
## PARTICIPANTS

- 570 individuals referred to the program
- 541 people received devices<sup>2</sup>



## LANGUAGES

- Provided training and/or resources in the following languages:
  - **In-person:** English and Spanish
  - **Virtually:** English, Mandarin, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese



## TRAINING HOURS

- **In-Person, Group Classes:** 368 hours<sup>3</sup>
- **Virtual, 1-on-1 Classes:** 239 hours
- **Tech Support:** 26 hours

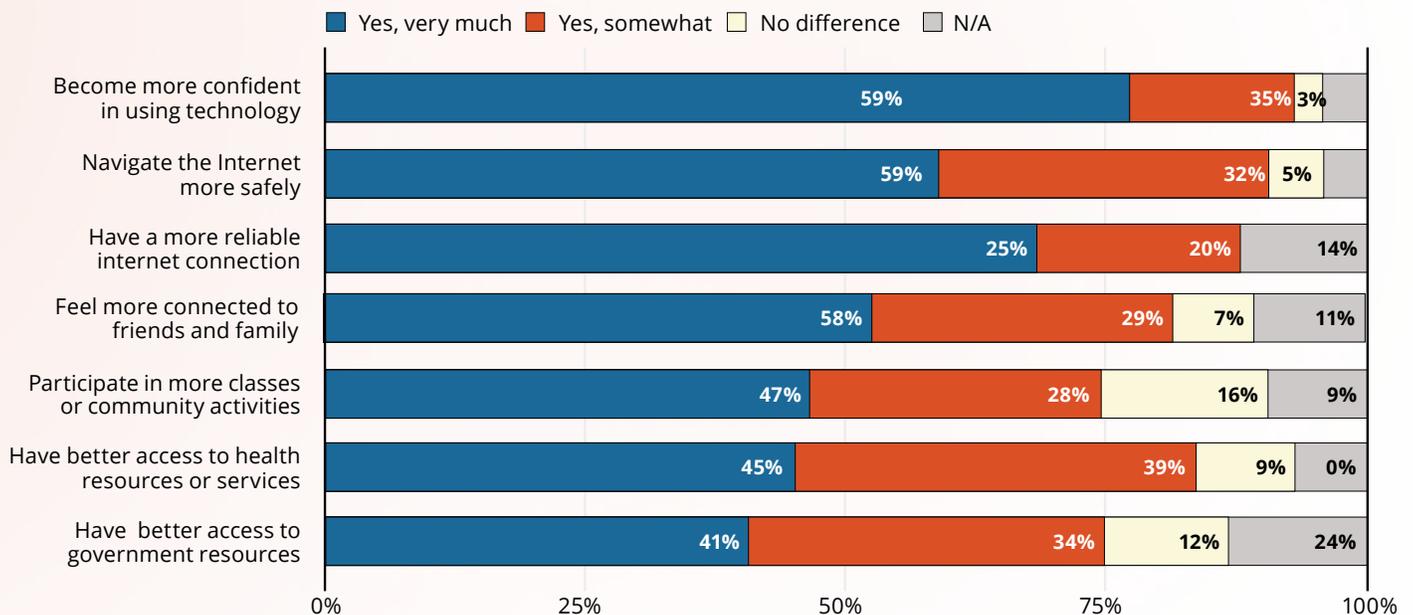
<sup>2</sup> Of the 570 folks who were referred to the program, these were the participants that did not already have their own tablets or laptops.

<sup>3</sup> Over the course of 204 classes.

## 15 REFERRAL PARTNERS

- Burbank Housing
- Cloverdale Senior Center
- Disability Services & Legal Center
- EAH Housing
- Graton Day Labor Center/ Centro Laboral De Graton
- La Luz
- Petaluma People Services Center
- Salvation Army Senior Activity Center, Santa Rosa
- Sebastopol Area Senior Center
- Silvercrest Senior Housing
- Sonoma County Adult Protective Services
- Sonoma County Area Agency on Aging
- Council on Aging/ Meals on Wheels
- Sonoma County Public Authority IHSS Caregiver Registry
- Sonoma County MSSP/Linkages Care Management
- West County Community Services: Russian River Senior Resource Center

### HAS THE PROGRAM ENABLED YOU TO... ?



**Survey results from 77 learners were overwhelmingly positive.**

# LEARNER PROFILES

**Dana:** Dana, a 69-year-old lifelong resident of Sonoma County, has always valued community. Her recent dive into the digital world has allowed her to stay even more connected with community members, particularly by using technology to support her work in running a local grief support group. “I wanted to use technology to help with organizing and communicating with other members of the group. This program has really helped me with that,” she explained. By mastering digital tools, Dana has been able to streamline communication and better manage the group’s activities, providing invaluable support to its members.

**Tina Soloa:** Tina, a 70-year-old former nurse, wanted to begin working part-time again and recognized that she needed technology skills to search and apply for work. With her instructor’s guidance, Tina reports, “I am now beginning to submit my applications online for the first time. I also occasionally do market research jobs for added income and I use my device for that as well.” Thus, Tina has been able to use the internet to support herself financially.

**Toby:** Living with a disability and on a limited income, 60-year-old Toby saw an opportunity to generate extra income by learning how to use his tablet’s camera. He takes pictures of his paintings and, with the help of his cousin, a professional photographer, processes and edits these images to create cards. These cards are now sold in various retail places in

Cloverdale, providing him with a source of income and a sense of accomplishment.

Being online has significantly boosted Toby’s self-reliance and confidence. Knowing that he can generate extra income by doing something he is passionate about has made him feel more empowered. The ability to improve his skills further enhances his confidence, motivating him to continue exploring new opportunities to promote and sell his art. “I got my new cards and people love them. I made 10 card sales in one day, \$100, and I’m going to be featured in a very busy local store. It is only possible because of my new tablet and training,” Toby said.

**Jose:** Jose is originally from Jalisco, Mexico, and currently lives in Santa Rosa, California. “I am no longer in the dark. I am 70 years old, and I can now look up anything online that I need to know or that I want more information on.” Now that Jose knows how to use the internet, he uses it for many daily activities. “I can look up church times, get more information about my insurance, and even read about the benefits of certain medicines and treatments.” Jose says he also loves reading about plants online and finding music and movies from his youth.

You can also watch these video testimonials from staff members at the Cloverdale Senior Center who discuss the impact that CTN’s program had on their community members.

- **Sandra**
- **Melanie**

*“I used to depend on my kids for everything, but now I can do things for myself because I learned [how to do things online] through this program.”*

*—Maria, 70*



# LESSONS LEARNED

## PROGRAM DESIGN

**Community needs assessments should be completed prior to starting the program.**

Since the program was initially set to conclude in December 2023, having launched just in February of the same year, CTN had to act quickly to select partner organizations. This urgency led to reliance on the County’s needs assessments rather than conducting a more comprehensive evaluation. Building trust and relationships with the hardest-to-reach and highest-need communities requires significant ramp-up time. The accelerated timeline left little opportunity to conduct a thorough assessment of digital skills and training needs, which could have further tailored the program to meet community-specific challenges.

**Adjust program design to accommodate the capacity of the partners.**

“Some of the earlier partners eventually ran out of steam or shifted their focus to other programs,” explains Phil Schutt, Instructor and Program Coordinator. While CTN continued to support the program by providing updated flyers and ongoing promotion, several partners completed their initial referrals but opted not to continue due to internal capacity constraints. However, partners who joined the program later, or those unable to participate initially due to limited resources, were enthusiastic about referring learners once they had more staff capacity for outreach and follow-up efforts. This renewed engagement helped sustain the program’s momentum and reach.

**The efficiency of group classes was often constrained by the referral partners' ability to recruit a full cohort.**

Some partners were well-prepared, with a group of participants ready to join as soon as the referral process began, making it easy to schedule initial group sessions. However, engaging more hesitant learners after the first enthusiastic wave proved more challenging. As the initial surge of referrals slowed to a trickle, some learners faced delays while waiting for enough participants to form a new group. In such cases, they were either placed in an in-person group once numbers allowed or offered virtual, one-on-one sessions.

Ultimately, however, CTN stopped creating cohorts and began to schedule open, ongoing classes for all program participants so that learners could be included as soon as they were referred to the program.

**Learner preferences and specifications should be considered when selecting devices.**

Originally, 8" tablets were distributed, which caused challenges for people with limited vision or fine motor skills. CTN was able to provide larger tablets and a choice of an iPad when extra funding was made available.

**PROGRAM DELIVERY**

**Ongoing digital navigator training and support is necessary.**

CTN initially began training 20 participants as digital navigators, but not everyone was able to complete the program. High staff turnover among partner organizations meant that some

employees left before finishing the training. New staff members who had not completed the digital navigator training struggled to maintain program activities and were unable to reconnect with previous learners to provide services at the center. Offering additional training for new staff and volunteers is crucial for ensuring continuity of service and support for learners.

**Build relationships with housing providers, disability services organizations, and case workers to reach the most socially-isolated people.**

In addition to partnering with established community centers, CTN worked with its own network of affordable housing providers from previous training programs and the County's in-home Social Services staff to reach people who did not usually participate in senior center activities. Although CTN had hoped to work with the Council on Aging (CoA) and its Meals on Wheels program, the CoA staff did not have the capacity to promote the program or engage volunteers to do so.

**Allow time to build relationships with new partners and priority communities.**

Petaluma People Services Center, Graton Day Labor, and the Salvation Army Senior Center did not have the staff capacity to promote the program until almost six months had passed. Then, their first few referrals were unresponsive and declined services. In the final months of the program, after CTN bilingual staff had visited the sites in-person multiple times, community members were more likely to participate.

**Building a network of partners ensures the continuity of CTN services.**

Organizations like EAH, Burbank Housing, and the Russian River Senior Resource Center, which had previously collaborated with CTN, were enthusiastic about continuing these partnerships. Referrals from these partners were highly responsive and eager to participate in training, thanks to CTN's established reputation for delivering valuable programs. Many learners also recognized the names of the instructors, who were available in-person during past programs to talk about the ATT initiative.

**Learners appreciate the option of in-person or virtual training.**

Some learners thrive in a group setting, but there were several participants with mobility and transportation issues who preferred learning from the comfort of their own home.

**In-person classes were effective outreach activities for some locations.**

Learners who were referred by County agencies and other partners that did not offer training in their own facilities could attend classes at The Salvation Army Senior Center. This brought more people into the Salvation Army's Center to participate in its other programs.

**Require a device orientation to increase learner engagement.**

CTN required individuals receiving free devices to attend a check-in orientation. This session covered essential functions, such as turning the device on and off and navigating the internet, while also verifying that recipients had an active email address. For learners hesitant to commit to full training, the orientation ensured they could perform basic operations. Additionally, these orientations often helped uncover further training needs.

**Ongoing training and support is critical.**

Retention and memory challenges were a big issue for some folks. Learners appreciated the opportunity to continue to attend the partners' in-person classes and drop-in hours, as well as CTN's online Q&A sessions, in order to ask questions about things they may have learned with their tutor and forgotten.

*“People can contact their doctors now. If they need information, they can go on YouTube to learn. This program has really enriched their lives. It’s given them a link to the whole world.”*

*—Mary Lockhart, Burbank Housing*



# SUMMARY

During the Access to Technology Program, CTN built on the success of its previous programs, which provided devices and digital skills training to older adults in Sonoma County. By enhancing its service delivery model to include digital navigator training and support—alongside direct services for learners—CTN helped establish **sustainable digital equity services** throughout the County.

CTN also demonstrated flexibility in meeting the evolving needs of learners and partners

by offering training in multiple languages, both in-person and virtually, as well as ongoing support for those requiring additional assistance.

With experienced bilingual staff, a tailored curriculum, and comprehensive support services, Community Tech Network is well-positioned to effectively serve both learners and the organizations supporting them.

# PARTNERS

