

Virtual Community Life Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of the COVID-19 epidemic and the related need for physical distancing, we have all had to figure out how to live differently. People have been asked to stay at home as much as possible and practice social distancing (staying at least six feet apart from one another). Social distancing does not, however, have to mean social isolation. People across the United States and the world are learning how to make and maintain social connections virtually.

A wide array of virtual activities has emerged on the internet, but not all online activities are of equal value when it comes to community life engagement for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). In this brief, we apply the Four Guideposts for Community Life Engagement to identifying virtual opportunities for interaction and engagement.

PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

With social distancing requirements in place, many of us are spending more time at home these days. People with IDD are no exception. Many are experiencing a furlough from their job or have been laid off by their employer. Others are experiencing the temporary closure of their day program and are unsure when they will be able to return. Some day programs are operating, but on a more limited basis. Some individuals have to take into consideration their age or underlying health conditions that place them at higher risk for complications from COVID-19.

On a positive note, individuals with IDD may be finding new opportunities to be independent in their homes and want to continue and expand this experience. People with disabilities, along with the family members and/or staff who support them, are actively seeking ways to stay engaged, active, and productive given these circumstances.

There are a lot more resources and opportunities available online these days. Everything from live performances, to museum exhibits, to small gatherings of friends is moving to platforms like Zoom, Facebook, and YouTube. But with all these opportunities, the dilemma is how to choose which to access. This brief shares recommendations for how to apply the Four Guideposts for Community Life Engagement in making that choice.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY LIFE ENGAGEMENT?

Community life engagement, or CLE, refers to how people access and participate in their communities outside of employment. CLE activities may include volunteer work; postsecondary, adult, or continuing education; accessing community facilities such as a local library, gym, or recreation center; participation in retirement or senior activities; and anything else people with and without disabilities do in their off-work time. For people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, day services and supports should include supports necessary for CLE as part of a meaningful day.

The Institute for Community Inclusion has been conducting research to identify the elements of day services and supports that lead to high-quality CLE. Through expert interviews and case studies with providers, four guideposts in delivering high-quality CLE supports were identified. For more on the guideposts, see: www.thinkwork.org/high-quality-community-life-engagement-supports-four-guideposts-success.

TECHNOLOGY ACCESS

Accessing the opportunities described here may require new learning, both for individuals with IDD and for the people supporting them, on technology tools. You may need to learn more about the basics of how to use a computer, iPad or iPhone, key applications, social media platforms, and Internet safety. Some individuals may need specialized assistive technology for access and communication.

You can find more information about technology and access in our publication, [Using Technology to Provide Quality Remote Services](#).



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GUIDEPOST 1

Individualize supports for each person

WHAT THIS GUIDEPOST IS ABOUT: Day services and supports should be tailored to the interests and needs of each unique person. This doesn't necessarily mean 1:1 support for everyone all the time, but it does require service providers to use creative approaches to staffing and scheduling to maximize pursuit of individual goals and interests.

How to apply this guidepost to online opportunities:

- » **As always, start with the person.** This may be the perfect opportunity for people with IDD to have discussions with family members or staff about their goals, preferences, interests, and life plans, and perhaps even update their person-centered plan.
- » **Look for opportunities tailored to each individual.** Use the information gained from discussing preferences, interests, and goals to look for online resources. Whatever the skill, hobby, or interest, there is probably some way to pursue it virtually these days!
- » **Look for ways to meet people with shared interests.** As many activities shift to an online format, there are more opportunities than ever to participate virtually with people all over the country and the world. This provides the chance to participate in activities that may not be available locally and connect with people in other locations in new and different ways.
- » **If you are supporting multiple individuals in the same home or space, they don't all have to be doing the same thing.** With the right technology, you could potentially support several people to access different online opportunities based on what they enjoy, are interested in, or want or need to learn.

GUIDEPOST 2

Promote community membership and contribution

WHAT THIS GUIDEPOST IS ABOUT: Promoting community membership starts with accessing the same settings and activities, at the same times, as community members outside the IDD system. But it also requires going beyond community presence to membership, relationships, and contribution. This means identifying the kinds of activities that promote connections, understanding how to encourage relationships with other community members, and finding opportunities to contribute through volunteer work.

How to apply this guidepost to online opportunities:

- » **Look for participatory and interactive activities.** A lot of virtual content is simply designed to be entertaining. While these have their place as fun diversions, they don't provide opportunities for connection, which is especially important as many of us are feeling so isolated. Seek out events that offer two-way communication and interactivity. For example, a cooking club that meets via Zoom is more interactive than watching a cooking demonstration on TV or YouTube.
- » **Seek out opportunities offered by local organizations.** Local libraries and neighborhood associations can be a great source for things like virtual book clubs, cooking clubs, or knitting circles. These offer people with IDD a chance to interact with others from their local community. This allows for re-connection with people they already know, or a chance to meet new people they might be able to get together with in person as social distancing requirements are eased.
- » **Focus on non-disability-specific activities.** In identifying activities online, just like activities in the community, prioritize those that are not disability-specific. For example, instead of an online exercise group for "special people," identify an online exercise class open to all.
- » **Look for ways to maintain previous activities and contacts.** What local activities or groups was the individual participating in before the pandemic? Contact those organizations to find out their current status. Perhaps they have moved activities online or figured out other ways to participate while staying safe.
- » **Find ways to give back.** Many local communities have online volunteer coordination efforts on platforms such as Facebook. Individuals can give back to the community by making masks at home, raising funds for the local food pantry, or sending notes to people in nursing homes or long-term care facilities.
- » **Don't forget you can still connect in-person too!** Join (or set up) a socially distant neighborhood gathering, a drive-by birthday celebration, or a neighborhood window- or sidewalk-decorating effort.

GUIDEPOST 3

Use human and social capital to decrease dependence on paid supports

WHAT THIS GUIDEPOST IS ABOUT: Individuals with disabilities can reduce their dependence on paid service systems by learning new skills themselves (human capital) and/or building relationship and identifying natural supports (social capital).

How to apply this guidepost to online opportunities:

- » **Look for chances to learn something new.** Learning a new skill can provide a sense of purpose and a way to focus on longer-term goals rather than simply getting through the day. There are a growing number of learning opportunities being offered online, often at low or no cost. Now might be a great time for an individual to take up that instrument they always wanted to learn, take a drawing class, or gain new gardening skills. Preferably, seek out a local, interactive way to do these things (see Guidepost 2). Consider if there's a skill the person can learn that will help with getting a job later on (see Guidepost 4).
- » **Seek out and/or build connections for natural support.** Perhaps someone from the local online knitting circle can teach the individual to knit virtually, or a neighbor can provide support in a Zoom book club. These supports can not only enable more virtual participation but also build relationships that might lead to different natural supports, such as rides to or support within an in-person group, in the future.

RELATED RESOURCES

Keeping Connected While Staying Apart. This resource from the Temple Collaborative on Community Inclusion was developed for people with mental illness, but highlights many ideas and resources that are useful for anyone.

Other COVID-19 Publications and Resources from ICI. Includes publications on day and employment services during the COVID-19 pandemic and a curated list of resources.

GUIDEPOST 4

Ensure that supports are outcome-oriented and regularly monitored

WHAT THIS GUIDEPOST IS ABOUT: Day services and supports should be offered and monitored with a goal of community inclusion in mind. This starts with a mindset that everyone has something to contribute and has a right to a full community-based life. It also requires monitoring whether people are pursuing and achieving their own goals and whether they are satisfied with their supports and activities. Finally, keep in mind how non-work services can be used to work toward employment goals through building employment skills or networking.

How to apply this guidepost to online opportunities:

- » **Continue to build employment skills.** Seek out ways for the individual to learn how to write a better resume, work on interviewing skills, and learn about different kinds of jobs. They may even be able to obtain job-specific skills by taking online courses.
- » **Look for opportunities for self-advocacy.** Support individuals to participate in a virtual self-advocacy training, event, or meeting. Your agency might host an online focus group for individuals to compare experiences and comment on their day services and supports, both now and in more typical times.



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