



# TECHNOLOGY HELPS AND HINDERS

## LESSONS FROM FOUR NONPROFIT LEADERS

### AMBASSADOR INSIGHTS

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*Developed collaboratively by the*  
**LEAP OF REASON  
AMBASSADORS COMMUNITY**

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# TECHNOLOGY HELPS AND HINDERS



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“Oh, no! I’m so sorry,” a co-worker exclaimed as her screaming toddler briefly joined a Zoom team meeting. Sound familiar? By now, we’ve all seen pets, children, or an unwanted glimpse of a co-worker’s pajama bottoms. Yikes! Crazy times indeed.

Zoom “oops” moments with teammates are pretty manageable, in comparison to what nonprofit leaders are facing. If they’re able to be in their facilities, they’re problem solving about how to provide services while social distancing, wearing masks, and disinfecting common spaces to reduce COVID-19 risks. They’re also learning the pros and cons of creatively using technology because the times demand it. Here, four nonprofit leaders share what they’ve learned about virtual operations during COVID-19.

### COMMUNITYWORX: APPLYING TECHNOLOGY ACROSS AN ORGANIZATION’S SERVICE AND BUSINESS MODELS

[CommunityWorx](#), an organization with multiple partners and collaborations, envisions a community where youth and their families have equitable access to resources and opportunity. President/CEO, **Barbara Jessie-Black** said, “The pandemic forced [our partners’] hand in getting online, and they’re reporting that their switch for art therapy, mentoring, music lessons, and more is working very well.” They’ve also expanded their geographic reach since transportation is no longer an issue.

For as many benefits that technology has offered nonprofit service delivery, there are also barriers. Jessie-Black pointed out the lack of broadband in certain parts of North Carolina, a problem that can’t be solved because the infrastructure doesn’t exist. Lack of access is a problem across America.

Access to hardware is also a problem because many kids were using technology in schools and libraries that are now closed. CommunityWorx and its partners successfully worked with [Kramden Institute](#) and [Triangle Ecycling](#) which collects, refurbishes, and provides computers to students and families. Both of these programs have helped bridge the gap for many children and their families.

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CommunityWorx also operates several thrift shops and that revenue has taken a hit due to COVID-19 restrictions. Eliminating merchandise to provide for social distancing and limiting the hours of operation have meant fewer sales. However, they're excited to move to an ecommerce site using the platform [Shopify](#), which is backed by tools that help find customers, drive sales, and manage day-to-day operations.

### OUR PIECE OF THE PIE: KNOWING YOUR DEMOGRAPHICS

It's not surprising that [Our Piece of the Pie](#) (OPP) has experienced great success with virtual offerings. After all, they serve 16- to 24-year-olds. Chief Operating Officer **Hector Rivera** said, "We entered our young people's [technology] playground, and they don't want us to leave." Seventy percent of their services are now automated, and they've seen an uptick in engagement, as well as additional requests (and a waiting list) from youth not currently enrolled.

Rivera said no technology platform was off the table. They're now using [Facebook Live](#), [Instagram Live](#), [Zoom](#), [Microsoft Teams](#), [Google Meet](#) and [House Party](#). They received permission from funders to change the requirements of their grants supporting in-person internships to virtual training. Content-driven apps, built by their team, are used to provide workforce-related content, leadership training, and skill development.

OPP's school, OPPportunity Academy, that re-engages over-age, under-credited students went 100% virtual in March 2020 and teachers and tutors extended their availability to evenings and weekends because students had lost childcare and jobs. They had 25 graduates instead of the projected 10 and even found a way to have a socially distant graduation ceremony—in their cars.

Great success doesn't come without barriers. Rivera identified two:

- Twenty percent of their clients didn't have access to technology, so they provided Chrome books, hot spots, and other Wi-Fi packages through new funding sources.
- Even though OPP was prepared to make a digital transition, some of their partners weren't. Inability to access certain program components led to great delays and lots of frustration for staff and students.

Rivera said, "Young voices are so important, and our youth should be consulted and their voices heard. OPP's young people taught the team about new technology and apps because we all know the older generation has a lot to learn from our youth."

## TECHNOLOGY AND YOUR TEAM: TOP TIPS

Each nonprofit leader said it's a mixed bag when it comes to staff's transition and acceptance of increased virtual operations and programs. Those who appreciate working from home, are comfortable with technology, and like virtual programs and appointments tend to be a bit happier and more productive than those who don't go figure. Here are some suggestions to help the rest of your team.

- Invest in technology training if team members are struggling. Training doesn't always require outside experts. More tech-savvy team members may be willing to partner with colleagues having difficulty.
- Ask team members what would help them succeed in a virtual environment. Sometimes answers are unexpected.
- Experiment with different apps to see which works best for your team. One size doesn't fit all when it comes to technology. But be willing to make the call about preferred apps so that information isn't scattered all over the place.
- Take note of your Zoom Brady Bunch screen to see how diverse or inclusive your team is. It can serve as a good reminder that your recruitment practices need to change and every voice needs to be heard.
- Go beyond the default screen in your video-conferencing app. Features like breakout rooms, polls, reactions, and the infamous mute button all help with increased connection and engagement.
- Pay attention to employees' mental health. Schedule some virtual social time since water cooler conversations aren't happening. Consider occasionally providing downtime breaks and shorter work weeks. One nonprofit leader began individual wellness check-ins and set up a group for those interested in discussing barriers and solutions to wellness. Read more tips in [8 Ways Managers can Support their Employees' Mental Health](#)
- Create policies that help employees know the expectations when working from home. [Time to Make a Work from Home Policy. Where Should You Start?](#) provides helpful information.

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### Y-HAVEN: INCREASING PARTICIPATION AND OVERCOMING ACCESS BARRIERS

[Y-Haven](#) provides temporary housing and drug and alcohol treatment for adults in need. Clinical Director **Phil Buck** said, “Working with homeless individuals who are recovering from addiction has become even more complicated as many services switched to online, and most individuals without a home don’t have digital access to these services. Many have flip phones, often with smashed screens, but no smart phones or data plans.”

Their team immediately moved to action: buying Zoom licenses, requesting smart phone donations, providing 30 Wi-Fi hotspots throughout the building, and securing a grant for additional technology. Clients also access [Lifeline](#), the Federal Communications Commission’s program that offers discounts on phones and data to help make communications services more affordable.

Initially, their clients attended online Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings, but Buck said the novelty seems to be wearing off. Many like attending in person because they miss the hugs, handshakes, and sense of community which may be lost online. However, Y-Haven is seeing a number of benefits from its hybrid model of online services, telehealth appointments, and in-person sessions, including:

- A higher frequency of kept appointments because it’s easier to check in online for 30 minutes during a work lunch break instead of commuting to the appointment.
- A lower no-show rate for telehealth appointments that eliminate the barriers of time and transportation.
- Easier access for their younger clients who have needed more support due to the opioid crisis.
- Improved technology skills for their clients.

Providing services to homeless individuals, especially those in hard-to-reach encampments, is especially challenging. Technology is being creatively used by a California Homeless Outreach team. [Using technology to enhance homeless outreach during COVID-19](#) describes how a speaker-equipped drone communicates with people across eight square miles of urban canyons. Services staged near common canyon exits provide face masks, food, hygiene kits, medical screenings, shelter options, and other information. What once took two days now takes three hours, thanks to technology.

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### DVCAC: USING TECHNOLOGY TO INCREASE SERVICES IN A TIME OF GREAT DEMAND

Leslie Quilty, former Chief Operating Officer of [Domestic Violence & Child Advocacy Center](#) (DVCAC), was surprised at how helpful Zoom sessions have been for many of their clients. Telehealth appointments have eliminated the barriers of time and transportation. “We can also see their environment, how they’re living, if it’s serene or chaotic, and how they interact with their families. This offers us a deeper look into their lives, and we’ve been able to see some safety considerations that the client might not have mentioned,” she said. Alarm bells went off when her team saw some of the situations kids were living with. The team’s first-hand knowledge helped create plans for greater safety.

[ICANotes](#), the team’s medical record platform, offers secure, integrated HIPAA-compliant telehealth functionality. Quilty said the quality of the video platform is much more personable since you can easily make clear eye contact with each other. Technology allows survivors to access therapists in the real time of crisis.

All nonprofits need to consider the best way to maintain confidentiality and privacy of personal data for their clientele, but it can be the difference between life and death for domestic violence victims. In [How Zero Trust Can Help Protect Domestic Violence Survivors](#), TechSoup’s **Nadine Argueza** outlines the cybersecurity community’s latest framework for securing data, zero-trust standards, and how an organization can prevent, detect, and respond to breaches regarding a survivor’s personal information.

DVCAC is currently seeing a greater number of clients and increased severity of mental health issues and crises. However, Quilty explained that Zoom calls are often unsafe for domestic violence survivors since perpetrators are now working from home. The organization offers in-person sessions as needed to manage their clients’ safety and well-being. Knowing when technology helps or hinders is crucial, and the safety issues surrounding domestic violence survivors can be tricky. But listening to victims about what works best for them is key.

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### CONCLUSION

Virtual operations are now an integral part of nonprofit operations. **Gayle Carpentier**, TechSoup’s Chief Business Development Officer, said, “Globally we’ve been amazed at how well Zoom has adapted, growing from 10M customers in early 2020 to now in excess of 400M in August 2020.” As nonprofits continue to search for technology resources for greater effectiveness, Carpentier suggests that [Resources For Nonprofits Impacted by COVID-19](#) is good place to understand the different programs and tools available to organizations.

Nonprofits will continue to experience common benefits and barriers with technology. Yet, we believe nonprofit leaders will continue to creatively problem solve for the benefit of those we serve. For many clients, their lives depend on it.