



The WeConnect-Social Tech for Seniors Pilot Project

EVALUATION BRIEF

January 2021

The WeConnect-Social Tech for Seniors (WC-STs) pilot project, a collaboration between St. Mary's Center (SMC) and SeniorFusion (seniorfusion.org), aimed to employ technology solutions to increase and improve the quality of social interactions for very low-income seniors during COVID-19 and enable them to continue participating in social justice activities.

WC-STs served 18 seniors, from 58 to 89 years of age living in the Oakland-Berkeley CA area who were members of SMC's Senior Advocates for Hope and Justice (HAJ) Program. Prior to COVID-19, HAJ participants regularly engaged in social justice activities in person, took field trips to attend public meetings, and participated in the activities of local advocacy organizations. The shelter-in-place order in March 2020 disrupted the HAJ program, socially isolating many of its participants who had limited technology skills and resources.

In response, WC-STs was designed to meet the needs of the HAJ seniors and for learning purposes as a pilot that could serve as a model for enabling and encouraging activities *between* members of an established group of seniors, while furthering their organizational goals.

From August to November 2020, WC-STs participants received technology equipment and engaged in a variety of activities including weekly group meetings, one-on-one and group technology trainings, and optional events and activities.

The WC-STs pilot was independently evaluated using pre- & post-project survey, interview, and project data. The evaluation documented how WC-STs was implemented and investigated how it changed participants' (1) technology skills, use, and confidence; (2) participation in social justice and advocacy activities; and (3) social connectedness. This brief provides a summary of the project implementation and reports key findings of the evaluation.

WC-STs Project Implementation

WC-STs took place from August to November 2020, delivering the following components:

Evaluation Highlights: Observed Post-Project Changes

Participants improved in technology skills, use, and confidence: Participants with a wide range of baseline technology skills (from no experience to "comfortable") increased the ease with which they performed basic technology skills. Nearly all reported regular use of technology by the end of the project.

Participants increased engagement in social justice and advocacy activities: The majority of participants reported participating in social justice activities on a weekly basis by the end of the project, while only a few had reported weekly involvement immediately prior to the WC-STs project.

Participants' social connectedness improved: Satisfaction with contact levels dramatically increased from pre- to post-project, likely due to increases in virtual contacts that benefited participants' feelings of connectedness and engagement.

Technology infrastructure. Before project kickoff, SMC program staff provided WC-STS participants with computers, microphones, cameras, Wi-Fi devices, and low-cost Internet. Desktop computers were donated by the Computer and Technology Resource Center. While adhering to social-distancing measures, SMC program staff installed technology at each participant’s residence and provided an initial orientation.

Weekly WC-STS group meetings. Weekly, 90-minute group meetings were led by SMC’s Director of Community Outreach & Services. These meetings were a required, core activity of the group. Agendas typically included thematic presentations on current events, well-being, and technology-related topics (see Box 1).

One-one-one sessions. Each participant received individualized training in technology skills that proved to be invaluable for success. These sessions also included activities linking back to group meetings and events. Sessions were held approximately weekly and lasted between 15-45 minutes depending on need.

Group technology classes. SMC program staff led optional, group technology classes that were responsive to senior’s interests and needs. The topics included Zoom hosting, emailing, and texting.

Supplemental events and activities. Each week, program staff provided information on optional, supplemental online events and activities hosted by other organizations that seniors could attend. Offerings were related to advocacy efforts, exercise and entertainment (see Box 2).

How Did WC-STS Participants' Technology Skills Change?

Prior to WC-STS, participants varied in their technology skills level and use. The majority of pre-project survey participants indicated that they could perform basic computer operations, for example turn on a computer, use a mouse, or get on the internet with some ease. A small number, however, did not even find those basic operations easy before WC-STS. Post-project survey results demonstrated that basic skills solidly improved, with the vast majority of participants reporting some ease or complete ease with basic operations of the computer. Furthermore, most participants were now able to talk to others somewhat easily or very easily on video chat and participate in online learning and justice activities. (See Figure 1)

Box 1 Examples of Topics Covered in WC-STS Weekly Meetings

Health: COVID-19, health risks regarding wildfires, fall prevention, physical activity benefits, disaster preparedness

Election Policy/Advocacy: Census, Voter registration, ballot/voter guide, Candidates Forum, post-election ballot measure results,

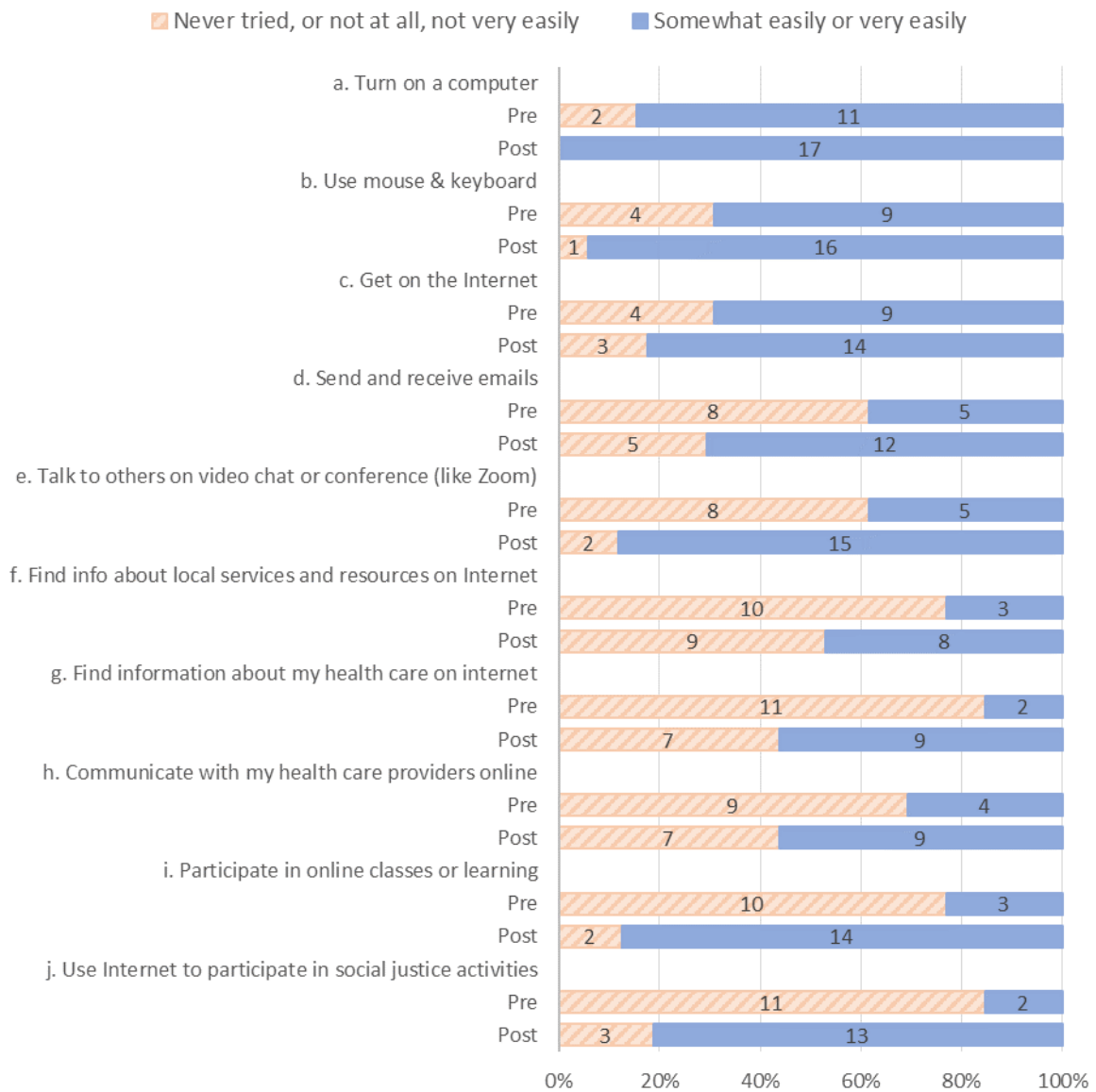
Technology: Google and YouTube, password/cyber-security, Facebook

Box 2 Examples of Supplemental Events

- California Alliance for Retired Americans Senior Vote Forum
- Health Care for the Homeless Consumer Advisory Board meeting
- United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda (USOAC) Candidate Forum
- USOAC Healthy Living Festival
- East Bay Housing Organizations (EBHO) Resident United Network meeting
- Financial Abuse/Estate planning workshop
- Jazz concert
- COVIA and tai chi exercise classes

Figure 1. Technology Skills Before and After Participation in the WC-STS Pilot Project

Survey Question: How easy are the following tasks for you now? I can ...



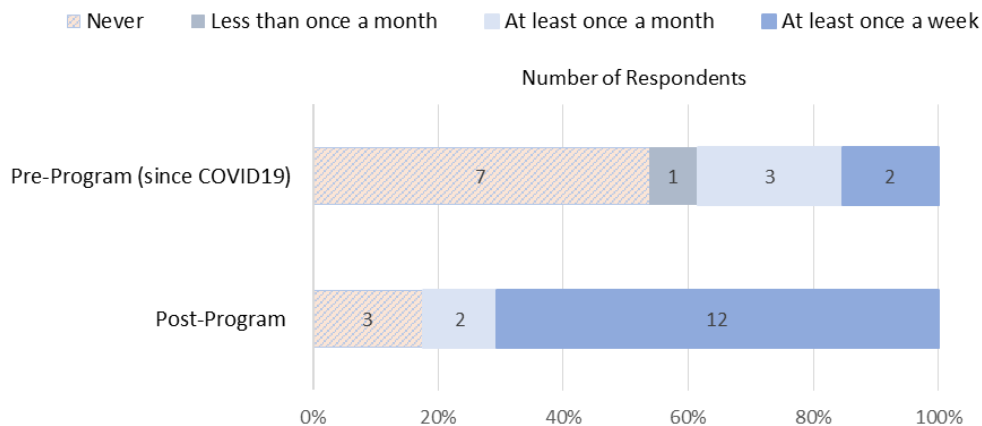
The areas where the *least* number of respondents (around half) reported ease of use at post-project included finding information about local services on the Internet, finding information about health care, and communicating with health care providers online. While these skill areas were not emphasized by WC-STS, even these areas showed improvement from baseline.

In addition to developing technology skills, participants reported in post-project interviews that they increased their awareness of different ways that they could use technology as well as their self-efficacy in approaching technology.

How Did WC-STS Participants' Involvement in Social Justice Activities Change?

WC-STS helped address the lapse in participants' social justice activity by reconnecting them to advocacy-related education, discussions, and activities. At post-project, the majority of survey respondents (12 out of 17) reported participating in social justice activities aside from WC-STS group meetings on a weekly basis, and everyone reported participating in them at least once a month (See Figure 2). This represented a large increase in activity from baseline, when only a couple of respondents were participating in social justice activities on a weekly basis.

Figure 2. Participation in Social Justice Activities Before and After Participation in WC-STS



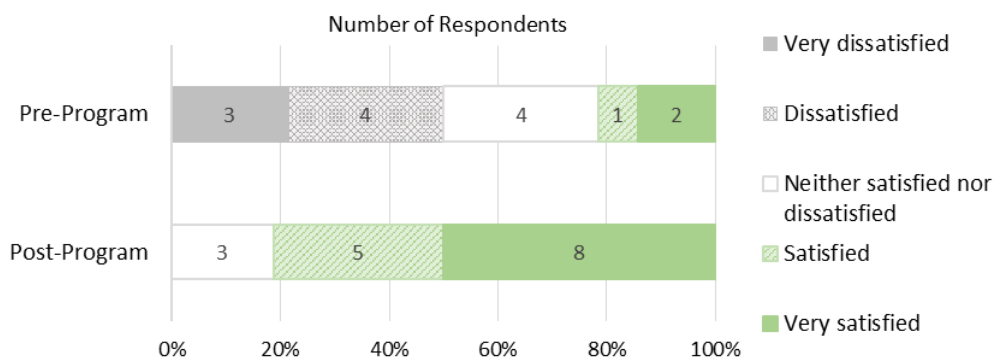
Note: The post-program question asked about social justice activities besides meetings and classes provided by the WC-STS program.

How Did WC-STS Participants' Contact and Engagement with Other People Change?

Technology and online activities appeared to be positively received by senior participants as a source for genuine connection with others. Participant satisfaction with their level of contact with others greatly increased from pre- to post-project (see Figure 3), likely due to increases in virtual contacts that enhanced a sense of connectedness and engagement.

Figure 3. Satisfaction with the Level of Contact with People Before and After Participation in WC-STS

Survey Question: How satisfied are you with your current level of contact with other people?



Post-project interview and testimonial perspectives shared by participants support that the quality of the interactions provided through WC-STS contributed to participant satisfaction. Themes shared by participants included the following:

Reconnecting with other HAJ participants online after a long hiatus increased participants' positivity and reduced stress. Participants mentioned looking forward to WC-STS sessions, which were a "weekly celebration." Once participant learned from the experience, "If your mind doesn't get the connectivity, it reduces positivity."

Weekly meetings and activities provided a space for participants to support each other through challenging times. According to one, "During COVID, it helps to know that there's other people going through the same things that I'm going through. We can talk about it and we can come up with a solution to it."

Having increased options for activities to do throughout the day helped participants keep occupied and connected to a purpose. Participants spoke of engaging their minds, learning new things, and feeling "a sense of something to do every day again." One participant mentioned that the activities had helped his depression and that he was feeling more motivated to maintain daily schedules and routines outside of the project activities.

Participants felt more empowered to address isolation by connecting with others. According to one, "Now I know there's a way that I still can connect with people. I don't feel isolated anymore. I can get on my computer."

Participants felt like they mattered. According to one, "I'm so grateful and so thankful for the fact that people are at the table for us, they do care, they have not forgotten about the seniors."

"It seems like [WC-STS] changes my whole perspective, because I may be a little lonely or feeling displaced, and then when I have our meeting, it's like, okay, life is good... it reaffirms that it's good and there is going to be hope, and it will be okay, in spite of the circumstances that are very challenging."

Key Findings

- Motivated seniors with a range of baseline technology skills were able to increase their technology skills and use over the course of a relatively short project, given adequate opportunities for hands-on support and practice.
- In addition to developing technology skills, participants developed confidence and awareness.
- Teaching technology in the context of other interests supported engagement in learning.
- Virtual, online connection appears to be a promising, meaningful substitute for in-person activities and social connection.
- Extremely dedicated and effective project staff was crucial in the high-quality delivery of WC-STS programming and learning experiences.
- WC-STS participants had existing relationships and experience that may have supported their success as a group.

This brief was prepared by external evaluators, Yasuyo Abe and Kristin Bard, based on *Evaluation of the WeConnect Social Tech for Seniors Pilot Project: Final Report* (Abe & Bard 2020).