COMMISSION ON SENIORS RECOMMENDATION 20210326-04Aii
FY 2022 Budget Recommendation and Related Recommendations on Expanding Access to
Online Connectivity for Older Adults

Date: March 26, 2021

Subject: FY2022 Budget Recommendation and Related Recommendations on Expanding
                  Access to Online Connectivity and Digital Literacy for Older Adults

Motioned By: Varteressian   Seconded By: Angel

Recommendation

The Commission on Seniors recommends the City Council direct the City Manager to take the following
actions to expand access to the Internet to underserved people and communities in Austin. This includes
older adults for whom access to the Internet means access to healthcare, economic activity, and social
interaction for wellbeing. Research has shown that older adults, especially in communities of color and
those with lower incomes, often lack access to the Internet, devices, and digital literacy skills. (See
Rationale below). These recommendations include actions that can be taken immediately outside the
budget process and recommendations for the FY 2022 budget:

1. Allocate a minimum of $25,000 in the Programming budget of Austin Public Library to develop,
    implement and promote digital literacy training for older adults that is designed using best
    practices in older adult learning.

2. Allocate a minimum of $25,000 from the budgets of Austin Public Library and the Parks and
    Recreation Department to continue and expand the targeted distribution of technology (loaned
    devices, hot spots and training) to older adults to address social isolation and other needs during
    the pandemic. APL reprogrammed $11,000 in 2020 and worked with PARD to provide digital
    devices, hotspots and specialized training to older adults who could no longer participate in in-
    person programming at PARD and APL sites due to the pandemic. These needs will continue as
    Austin slowly returns to normal. Further, absent the pandemic there are older adults who are
    homebound and will benefit from online access to city programs and other services.

3. Allocate a minimum of $150,000 from Austin Public Health's budget for grants to organizations
    providing connectivity (devices, internet, and training) to older adults in Austin that need access
    to the Internet. It is estimated that $150,000 could support access, devices, and training 200-250
    older adults for one year. Grantees should be required to leverage other available funding from
    state and federal programs and enroll clients in the Emergency Broadband Benefit (see
    description below).

4. Direct Austin Public Health, Austin Public Library, the Parks and Recreation Department, the
    Housing and Planning Department and any other appropriate department to immediately begin

initiatives to assist eligible clients in enrolling in the federal Lifeline program. Enrollment in Lifeline gives eligible households access to the Emergency Broadband Benefit -a discount of up to $50 per month towards broadband service and a one-time discount of up to $100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet from participating providers if the client contribute $10-$50 toward the purchase price.

5. Direct Housing and Planning to require free internet service in affordable housing options supported by the City. The City Council should recommend the Austin Transit Partnership include free internet in rental housing that it finances.

6. Direct Austin Public Library to apply for any grants for which it is eligible under the Emergency Connectivity Fund of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 and use a portion of the grant to expand digital access to older adults.

7. Direct Austin Public Library, the Parks and Recreation Department, the Economic Development Department, and any other appropriate department to apply for grants under any current or forthcoming federal or state program to expand digital access to the underserved in Austin, including older adults.

Rationale:

The COVID-19 pandemic made plain the necessity of Internet connectivity and the gaping disparities that exist. Much attention has been paid to the importance of home-based technology tools and training for education and employment. There is less attention to the digital divide experienced by older adults, particularly those in communities of color and those with low incomes.

Older adults are a fast-growing population in Central Texas. Because many lack access to technology and training, they have limited telehealth options and fewer social interactions with friends and family. Many older adults are simply cut off from the necessities of life in 2021. This disparity has been manifested in the well-publicized difficulties older adults are facing in registering for a COVID-19 vaccine.

A new report by Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) and Humana on digital connectivity among older adults found:

- Nearly 22 million (42%) of American seniors lack wireline broadband access at home.

- Loneliness and disengagement are costing lives:

  - Over 80% of COVID deaths in the U.S. have been older Americans, and research estimates that about 40% of them were unable to access need online resources because they lacked in-home internet.

- Lack of internet is a public health crisis:

  - Medicaid enrollees are 2.7 times more likely to be offline.

  - Those with functional impairments are twice as likely to be offline.

- Lack of internet is a social justice crisis:

     o   Older adults with less than a high school degree or an income below $25,000 are ten times more likely than the general population to be offline.

     o   Black and Latino seniors are more than 2.5 and 3.3 times more likely, respectively, to be offline.

Despite being a technology hub, recent research done in the Central Texas Area found a glaring digital divide for older adults:

In the early days of the pandemic, the Social Inclusion Task Force, led and organized by the Aging Services Council, came together to explore ways to bridge the digital divide for older adults. The task force includes representatives from nonprofit organizations AGE of Central Texas, Area Agency on Aging, Austin Free-Net, Austin Pathways, AustinUP, Community Tech Network, Drive a Senior ATX, Drive a Senior Central Texas, Drive a Senior Northwest, Faith in Action Georgetown, Family Eldercare, Meals on Wheels Central Texas, Senior Access, Senior Helpers Central Texas, Senior Planet (OATS - Older Adult Technology Services), South Asians' International Volunteer Association (SAIVA) and The University of Texas at Austin School of Information and School of Nursing.

The Task Force conducted a survey under the guidance of Dr. Bo Xie, a professor at The University of Texas Austin, School of Information and School of Nursing. Staff members of several participating nonprofits identified, recruited, and surveyed participants via telephone. Survey data were collected between May and September 2020 from 654 older adults (most were 65+) in Central Texas.

Overall, this survey found that:

- Older adults of Central Texas want mobile technology.

- Older adults of Central Texas want internet access at home.

- Older adults of Central Texas are beginner or intermediate level technology users and want someone to train them on how to use a device at home.

- Older adults of Central Texas are interested in a free tech training program provided via telephone.

In addition to the quantitative data, the call for greater connectivity in Austin was one of the top recommendations made by members of the public at each of the three city-wide Budget Engagement Forums sponsored by the Joint Inclusion Committee. Concerns cited by the community included:
- need for wifi, devices, training
- the need to address the different needs for seniors, kids in schools, adults working from home, people with disabilities or who are homebound, people who need access to healthcare (e.g. telehealth)
- access to workforce development and job postings

Vote

For: Briesemeister, Varteressian, Angel, Bordie, Hauser, Lugo, Nicola, Temperley, Van Sickle, Spain

Against: None

Abstain: None

Absent: Cagle, Kareithi, Garcia-Pittman, Jackson

Attest:

Janee Briesemeister, Chair