New America Media, Empowering Ethnic Seniors Online Helps to Close the Gray Gap in South Florida (4.23.12)

MIAMI--If the staff at Miami's Alliance for Aging [http://www.allianceforaging.org/] had their way, every senior in Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties would be computer savvy. The Alliance staff has seen the positive results that computer access by seniors brings--thanks to an innovative and cost-efficient training program, now in its third year.

"Let me tell you, it's the best thing that could've happened," said Charles Hart, an African American elder from picturesque Key West, "the part the tourists don't see."

Hart, 70, uses a wheelchair to get around. Without assistance, his world is limited to his home and yard. "I don't have no entertainment except for the TV, and I don't get out except to go to doctors," he explained.

Digital Gap and Ethnic Elders

The Alliance hopes its online pilot project will help bridge the digital divide for many more older adults like Hart. Most seniors caught in what the Alliance's President and CEO Max Rothman calls the Gray Gap are low-income ethnic elders who lack computers or crucial broadband connections. Geography, cost, literacy and housing all pose barriers, as does anxiety about computers.

"Broadband use is rapidly increasing, but there's still a wide swath of the country that lacks high-speed Internet service," said Rothman during the Aging in America conference in Washington, D.C., last month.

About two-thirds of households in the United States used broadband in 2011, but "a large portion of the population is being left behind--unable to fully participate in civic or public life," Rothman stated.

Nationally, there are signs of gains among those 74-plus. A 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center

found that only 30 percent in that age group go online. However, that should improve in the coming years because Internet use among those now 65-73 was at 58 percent. Among older boomers ages 56-64, 76 percent are comfortable logging in.

The Pew report also notes that despite the lower level of Internet usage by seniors, they are becoming more sophisticated at their keyboards. Among all ages tapping into social network sites, says the study, "the fastest growth has come from Internet users 74 and older: social-network site usage for this oldest cohort has quadrupled since 2008, from 4 percent to 16 percent."

Another just-released Pew report on "Digital Differences" found that "age (being 65 or older), a lack of a high school education and having a low household income (less than $20,000 per year) are the strongest negative predictors for Internet use."

Helping Low-Income Elders at Risk

In Miami-Dade County, nearly 15 percent of the population is age 65 or more, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Six in 10 are Hispanic, and one in eight seniors there is at or under the federal poverty line. According to data from the Florida Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Report, two-thirds of seniors "feel isolated" and say they lack social and emotional support.

Complicating the Gray Gap, for lower-income seniors, many government programs -- such as SNAP (food stamps) -- now require online applications, said Islara B. Souto, the Alliance's director of planning and special projects.

The Alliance, which provides federally mandated services to older people in the Miami region, saw this gap widening and realized the need for an innovative training program to empower low-income ethnic elders to learn to use a computer and the Internet. Startup costs were covered by funds from the Older Americans Act.

"We had some simple goals," said Rothman. The program aimed to reduce that isolation by allowing seniors to find new friends and connect with family members through social networking, e-mail and photo sharing. It could also benefit their pocketbooks through using a tool such as Skype, which is less costly than long distance calls.

Charles Hart is one of 730 seniors the project has trained to date. He got involved with the Alliance project when they offered him a computer through STEPS in the Right Direction, a nonprofit agency serving low-income elders in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties.

"I said I would not mind having one, but I don't know how to operate one," Hart said. "But they said they would teach me, and I've got a grandson that knows all about it."

Hart recalled, "When they brought it in, at first, I didn't want to touch it, there's all those keys and stuff. I said, 'I'm too old to start learning this, I don't need it, I don't want it."

But it didn't take long for Hart to pick up basic computer skills. With the help of his grandson, he set up a Gmail account, began sending and receiving e-mail and searched for health information. Also, he discovered, "I can travel and never go out of my house."

"Let me tell you, that computer has really saved my life," Hart stated. "I'd really be lonely without it."

Hart noted that he uses his computer to watch movies, hear music and keep up with the news. Then he confided, "I really like watching the dogs," especially live racing at one of Florida's dozen or so greyhound tracks.

Reducing Social Isolation

As seniors stop working, observed Horacio Soberon-Ferrer, a vice president of the Alliance, many tend to lose mobility and become more isolated. That can lead to depression, which in turn, can lead to disease and higher medical costs.

Miami's diverse senior population from Latin America, the Caribbean and other reaches of the globe make issues of language, literacy and low-income complicated and widen the disconnect between seniors and access to the Internet.

To seek a helping hand from broadband service providers, manufacturers and computer retailers, the Alliance combined forces with health and social agencies they work with to provide government-sponsored programs, such as senior centers and subsidized meals.

By leveraging their combined market power, the agencies were able to get refurbished computers donated or at low cost and training assistance from company volunteers, as wells as reduced broadband rates the first year--plus technical support from AT&T and Comcast. (The program absorbed the technology costs.)

Volunteer trainers helped set up accounts and addressed low literacy by using pictograms along with a bilingual listing of information sources.

"If all we did was get them to use Skype to communicate with children and grandchildren, to maybe do some basic e-mailing, that would be a tremendous step forward for so many older people, particularly those with limited English proficiency," Rothman said.

From "Mind Training" to Alzheimer's Aid

In 2010, the first year of the program, three agencies provided seniors equipment, home-based and group training.

The initial multicultural group included 81 elders, age 63-85, who trained at two different senior centers. Eighty percent of them "graduated," and many expressed a sense of satisfaction about their new independence, Rothman said. The program trained an additional 77 frail seniors and their caregivers at home.

Also, the project used a program to assess and improve "mind-training" exercises to help elders sharpen their memories and awareness of things around them. One of these games, for instance, flashes random pictures on the screen. A senior must determine which pictures in a second series of images also appeared in the first. Players earn points for accuracy and speed.

To date, 730 elders in two counties have been formally trained through the program. The total three-year projected costs are $454,000, or about $622 per person, including hardware, software, licenses, training and connection fees. Rothman said that is a very cost-effective use of funds.

One project in conjunction with the University of Miami involves technology education and cognitive assessment for people with Alzheimer's and their caregivers.

Many more elders received informal training via self-paced learning, using modified computer software programs and tutorials.

This is the third year of the project, the Alliance is. only able to offer group training due to cost. However, savings from consolidation has enabled the Alliance to expand the program to include Monroe County, where Hart lives. In the first quarter of 2012, the program's staff and volunteers trained 200 people, and another 100 are on the waiting list.

The Alliance is developing training programs and curricula in several languages, and the agency is using a telephone helpline to give seniors appropriate referrals, provide technical support and offer additional services as needed.

Eventually, the Alliance will convert what they are learning from the pilot program into guides other agencies around the country to replicate their success.

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