

# Austin Area Older Adults' Technology Wants and Needs during COVID-19: Results of a Community Survey

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## Participating Organizations

- Area Agency on Aging, Capital Area Council of Governments (CAPCOG)
- Capital Area Aging and Disability Resource Center, CAPCOG
- Drive a Senior Central Texas
- Drive a Senior ATX West
- Drive a Senior Northwest
- Family Eldercare
- Faith in Action Georgetown
- First Presbyterian Church
- Meals on Wheels Central Texas
- South Asians' International Volunteer Association (SAIVA)
- Senior Access
- Senior Helpers Central Texas
- St. George's Court

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 health crisis is also an information crisis.<sup>1</sup> As older adults face the challenges and fears of elevated health risk due to COVID-19, access to technology can mitigate barriers to information and communication. Yet, access alone will not solve this issue. Since older adults are less likely to obtain digital information and services, it is necessary to understand their needs as well as the barriers when using technology.<sup>2</sup> In an effort to produce effective programming to introduce or assist older adults in learning how to use technology devices such as smartphones, laptops, iPads/Tablets, and desktop computers, we needed to ascertain the wants and needs of the community in terms of technology and internet access.

The Social Inclusion Task Force of the Aging Services Council conducted a survey to assess the technology wants and needs of the Central Texas area older adult community. Staff members of the participating organizations identified, recruited, and surveyed participants via the telephone. Survey data were collected between May 2020 and September 2020 from 654 older adults in Central Texas.

### **Overview of participant demographics**

Of the 654 respondents, 602 provided their age (age range: 42-100; average age: 76.7 years old). Among them, 562 were older adults aged 65 or older (age range: 65-100; average age: 77.9 years old). Over three fourths of the respondents were female (415 or 78.7%) and predominantly White Caucasian (384; 78.7%). Respondents also reported their racial group as American Indian/Alaska Native (3; .6%); Asian (9; 1.8%); Black/African American (45; 9.2%); Multi-Racial (16; 3.3%); and other (31; 6.4%). Few respondents (47; 11.0%) reported they are of Hispanic or Latino descent. When asked about their preferred language, most of the respondents (511; 95.2%) answered that English is their preferred language, with a small percentage of respondents (16; 3.0%) preferring Spanish. Most of the respondents have a high school education or beyond. Once adjusted to calculate only respondents that offered their yearly household income range (removing “Do not know for certain” and “Do not wish to answer”), a majority of respondents (155; 56.0%) earn less than \$20,000.

### **Older adults of Central Texas want mobile technology**

Some older adults in Central Texas (130; 11.4%) do not have access to a working tech device. Of respondents who reported they did own tech devices, a smartphone was most frequently reported (403; 35.4%). When asked if they would like to have a tech device, over half of respondents (129; 55.4%) answered yes. Mobile technology devices were most popular. A large portion of respondents reported they wanted Laptops (104; 40.6%), followed by iPad/Tablets (86; 33.6%), smartphones (42; 16.4%), and desktop computers (24; 9.4%).

### **Older adults of Central Texas want internet access**

When asked if the respondent would like to have internet access at home 79 (46.2%) said yes, 26 (15.2%) said maybe, and 66 (38.6%) said no. Over half of the respondents (405; 56.1%), when asked how they access the internet at home, said that they pay for a broadband internet connection.

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

When asked about their familiarity with technology, respondents rated their skills as: never used (80; 12.9%), beginner (227; 36.5%), intermediate (254; 40.8%), advanced (61; 9.8%). Even though a slight majority (339; 55.1%) of the respondents have someone who can help them with technology training, older adults reported they want tech training in order to use technology effectively. Respondents reported that to effectively use technology they needed someone to train them on how to use the device (270; 35.4%); someone to help them use the device (183; 24.0%); and financial assistance for internet and the device (167; 21.9%). Only a small minority of respondents (65; 8.5%) do not want technology in their home.

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

Older adults (308; 50.5%) are interested in programming that would teach tech training provided over the telephone, but only if it were free. Whereas only a few respondents (59; 9.7%) said they would be interested in tech training and willing to pay for it.

Overall, this survey suggests:

- 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.

### References:

1. Xie, B., He, D., Mercer, T., Wang, Y., Wu, D., Fleischmann, K. R., Zhang, Y., Yoder, L. H., Stephens, K. K., Mackert, M., Lee, M. K. (2020). Global health crises are also information crises: a call to action. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology (JASIST)*. Early view published online on March 13, 2020. <https://asistdl.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/asi.24357>
2. Xie, B., Charness, N., Fingerman, K., Kaye, J., Kim, M., & Khurshid, A. (2020). When going digital becomes a necessity: ensuring older adults' needs for information, services, and social inclusion during COVID-19. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*. 32(4-5): 460-470. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2020.1771237>

Complete participant background demographics are provided in Table 1 below. Responses to the survey questions are provided in Table 2.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Characteristics	<i>n</i> (%)
Gender	
Female	415 (78.7)
Male	112 (21.3)
Hispanic/Latino	
Yes	47 (11.0)
No	382 (89.0)
Race	
American Indian/Alaska Native	3 (0.6)
Asian	9 (1.8)
Black/African American	45 (9.2)
Multi-Racial	16 (3.3)
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0 (0.0)
White Caucasian	384 (78.7)
Other	31 (6.4)
Education	
No formal education	2 (0.4)
Less than high school graduate	27 (5.5)
High school graduate/GED	98 (19.8)
Vocational training	19 (3.8)
Some college/Associate degree	150 (30.3)
Bachelor's degree (BA, BS)	111 (22.4)
Master's degree (or other post-graduate training)	74 (14.9)
Doctoral degree (PhD, MD, EdD, DDS, JD, etc.)	14 (2.8)
Yearly household income	
Less than \$20,000	155 (31.4)
\$20,000 - \$29,999	51 (10.3)
\$30,000 – \$39,999	24 (4.9)
\$40,000 – \$49,999	12 (2.4)
\$50,000 – \$59,999	8 (1.6)
\$60,000 – \$69,999	4 (0.8)
\$70,000 – \$99,999	11 (2.2)
\$100,000 or more	12 (2.4)
Do not know for certain	47 (9.5)
Do not wish to answer	169 (34.3)
Preferred language (open text response)	
English	511(95.2)
Spanish	16(3.0)
Other	10(1.9)

\*Some data are missing; percentages shown are valid percentages.

Table 2. Older adults' technology needs

Current technology and needs	<i>n</i> (%) <sup>*</sup>
Do you have access to a working tech device? (select all that apply)	
Smartphone	403 (35.4)
iPad/Tablet	197 (17.3)
Laptop	209 (18.3)
Desktop	200 (17.6)
None	130 (11.4)
If you do not have a tech device, would you like to have one?	
Yes	129 (55.4)
Maybe	27 (11.6)
No	77 (33.0)
If you would like to have a tech device, which one would you prefer to have? (select all that apply)	
Smartphone	42 (16.4)
iPad/Tablet	86 (33.6)
Laptop	104 (40.6)
Desktop Computer	24 (9.4)
How do you access the internet AT HOME? (select all that apply)	
I pay for a broadband internet connection (Comcast/Xfinity or AT&T)	405 (56.1)
Through my smartphone/mobile data plan	157 (21.7)
I do not have access to the internet at home	109 (15.1)
Other	51 (7.1)
If you <b>do not</b> have internet access at home, would you like to have it?	
Yes	79 (46.2)
Maybe	26 (15.2)
No	66 (38.6)
If you are familiar with using tech devices, how would you rate your technology/computer skills?	
Never used	80 (12.9)
Beginner	227 (36.5)
Intermediate	254 (40.8)
Advanced	61 (9.8)
Do you have anyone who can help you with technology training and usage?	
Yes	339 (55.1)
No	276 (44.9)
If tech training were available to you through the phone, would you use it?	
No	243 (39.8)
Yes, but only if it were free	308 (50.5)
Yes, and I'd be willing to pay for it	59 (9.7)
In order to have and effectively use technology at home, which of the following types of help would you need? (select all that apply)	
Financial assistance for internet and the device	167 (21.9)
Someone to help me use the device	183 (24.0)
Someone to train me on how to use the device	270 (35.4)
Other	77 (10.1)
I don't want technology at home	65 (8.5)
Do you currently live in a residential community?	
Yes	340 (55.5)
No	273 (44.5)

\*Some data are missing; percentages shown are valid percentages.