

Women's centre helps vulnerable seniors become tech-savvy

For over 30 years, the North York Women's Centre (NYWC), located in Toronto, has been dedicated to giving women the tools they need to empower themselves. Their services range from employment readiness to violence prevention, but recently, their Executive Director was keen to explore digital literacy.

She knew she wanted to deliver a digital literacy program, but wasn't sure how to go about teaching it, so she turned to Google. It was there that she came across *Youth Teaching Adults*, a free digital literacy program run by ABC Life Literacy Canada that offers free lesson plans on apps and tools such as FaceTime, Gmail and WhatsApp.

Combined with funding that that NYWC had received earlier in the year from the federal government, United Way and a private foundation, Executive Director Iris Fabbro launched an innovative digital literacy program for at-risk senior women.

Overcoming programming challenges

The original plan was to host women in-person at their centre and teach them to use tablets. Unfortunately, when COVID-19 hit, they were forced to adapt their delivery model like many other organizations.

"We ended up identifying those women who were most at risk – particularly older women who are isolated, living alone and homebound due to medical issues – and going into their homes," says Iris. "Our staff were equipped with PPE and they visited each of the women individually, gave them a free tablet and internet, and taught them how to use it."

The program has become very popular, and many of the women in the program have even begun emailing each other as pen pals or connecting on Zoom.

"It can take two, three and often more visits before the women are comfortable with using the tablet, but now most of them are comfortable emailing, video conferencing with family, doing research online, streaming live sermons from their place of worship, and even listening to music."



Older people more at-risk of isolation

A recent study showed that social disconnection puts older adults at greater risk of depression and anxiety, and can even lead to health problems such as cognitive decline and heart disease. People with strong social bonds are 50 per cent less likely to suffer negative effects from isolation than those who have fewer social connections. While technology can be effective in connecting isolated seniors with friends and family, access to technology is still an issue.

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Removing barriers through technology

Now that the seniors are able to use the device, Iris says she wants to focus more on showing them exactly what they can use them for.

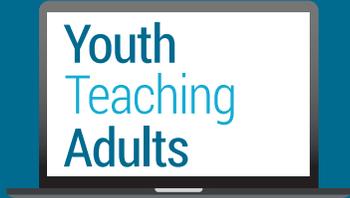
“They’re so happy when they realize what they can do online, such as applying for housing or connecting with their doctor. They had no idea this world was available to them. Many of them didn’t even have an email address before, and so that’s one of the first things we set them up with.”

Iris says once the women know how to use the tablet, if they want to learn more, NYWC can connect with them remotely and share screens to show them how to do things. It eliminates them from spending too much time face to face. They’ve also created a reference guide using the *Youth Teaching Adults* lesson plans, so that the women can refer back to them in case they forget how to do something.

Iris explained that NYWC modified some of the program lesson plans so that they were tablet-friendly (currently lesson plans are focused on computers, iPhones and Androids) before printing them off and putting them in a binder. When they visit the women to set up their tablet, they leave the binder behind so the women can refer back to it.

Youth Teaching Adults is a collaboration between ABC Life Literacy Canada and Youth Empowering Parents and is partly funded by the Government of Canada through the Digital Literacy Exchange Program.

To learn more about *Youth Teaching Adults* or to sign up to host a free workshop, visit YouthTeachingAdults.ca



Youth
Teaching
Adults

According to Stats Canada, in 2016, 68.2 per cent of seniors had access to the internet, up from 32.2 per cent in 2007.

2007



32.2%

of seniors had access to the internet

2016



68.2%

of seniors had access to the internet

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