

Massachusetts Aging Network Guide for Hybrid Programs and Services

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This guide is a tool for aging services professionals to use as they plan for hybrid programs and services if a community is interested and able to provide these types of programs. The guide is not intended to be a list of criteria, rather considerations and questions for an optimal hybrid experience for all participants.

What is a Hybrid Program or Service?

A hybrid program or service allows for participation both live (in-person) and virtual (remote). A successful hybrid program offers an optimal visual and audio experience to all participants, regardless of their physical location.

Planning for Hybrid Programs and Services

When planning for hybrid programs and services, organizations should consider the space and layout, the type of program, the size of the program and other factors. For example, a program that requires conversation between all participants may require additional technology (speakers and microphones) and staff support to ensure both live and virtual participant engagement; while a program that involves listening and asking questions of a single instructor may need less equipment.

- ❖ **Type of Program:** Consider the type of program, the goals of the program, and if the program requires communication between participants.
- ❖ **Physical Space and Infrastructure:** Based on the physical space, available infrastructure, as well as technology, determine if all participants can see and hear the instructor and fellow participants. A U-shape table set-up may allow for optimal engagement.
- ❖ **Staff and Volunteer Capacity:** How many staff are available to help run the program? Is there staff available to assist with the technology, as well as the program instruction? It may be advantageous to ask staff or a volunteer to monitor online participation to ensure participants who want to ask a question or engage are able to do so, as well be to assist virtual participants with audio and/or visual capabilities.
- ❖ **Instructions and Pre-Program Session:** Provide clear housekeeping instructions in advance or at the start of the program so that instructors and participants understand how to engage and ask questions (whether live or virtual). Prior to the beginning of the class, hold a prep session to make certain that people are able to use the technology and build a relationship with virtual participants.
- ❖ **Test and Prepare:** Do a test run of the program before the live session. Check for audio and video volume and quality, positioning of camera, speakers, and video screen, as well as the participant interaction plans.
- ❖ **Duration:** Acknowledge that there may be a difference in the length of time people are able to engage in a program or service, based on whether they are live or virtual. It may be helpful to take breaks, create shorter segments, and have participants stand and stretch.
- ❖ **Partners:** Are there other organizations that may have capabilities, space, and/or infrastructure to partner with and leverage? Examples include local schools, libraries, and other municipal departments, regional planners, community centers, service organizations, and colleges and universities.
- ❖ **Gather Input:** Whether it is through a formal survey or conversation with participants, find a way to know what is working and what could be improved. Find ways to gather all perspectives, including attendees, instructors, and support staff, including those who may have left the program early.
- ❖ **Look for Patterns:** Who does hybrid seem to be working for, and who is it not? Why is that? Are there certain classes that work better as hybrid? Are there days and times that seem better?
- ❖ **Trial and Error:** Part of the process is seeing what works. It may be advantageous to do a test of a hybrid program. All of this is new so organizations should be willing to make mistakes while trying out options.

Technology and Infrastructure

Organizations are encouraged to **assess their current technology and infrastructure capabilities when offering hybrid and virtual programming.**

- ❖ **Compatibility with Current Technology:** Is the technology compatible with the devices currently used? Does the technology work with a Windows Operating System, Mac Operating System, or both?
- ❖ **Setup:** What does the setup process require? Is it time-intensive or require advanced technological skills?
- ❖ **Video Monitors and Speaker Engagement:** Does the technology have automatic active speaker detection? Does it allow for split screen capacity to focus on multiple active speakers? As a way to optimally engage with virtual participants, try using large monitors or a projector to amplify the size of videoconferencing.
- ❖ **Video Camera:** What can be used for the video camera (in device or separate)? Does it have built-in microphones? Does the camera zoom, and does it have a bi- or omni-directional microphone? Consider using a tripod to hold the camera in place.
- ❖ **Audio:** What is the radius of the audio pickup? (e.g., a 12-foot radius is better for smaller rooms, while an 18-foot radius may be needed for medium and larger rooms). Does the camera have automatic active speaker detection? Even if using videoconferencing technology, consider having the instructor call in via phone if the internet is unstable.
- ❖ **Connection:** What cables will be needed to extend the connection between the device and the instructor or dock, if any? Is there an opportunity to connect via ethernet to ensure stable internet? It may be helpful to label all cords/cables for simple set-up and draw a diagram or photograph the connection.
- ❖ **Special Features:** Does the technology allow for other special features such as live polls of the participants or the ability for participants to ask questions or comment in a chat feature? Does the technology have other features that shift the camera and microphone to focus on whomever is speaking? Some systems have sound optimization, which suppresses unwanted noise with auto-level loud and soft voices?

Accessibility and Inclusivity

All organizations are encouraged to **develop and review their programs and services with a lens toward equity.** Organizations should strive to ensure programs and activities have equal access and opportunity for all members of the community, including individuals living with dementia.

- ❖ **Language and Accessibility Capacity:** Are assistive devices available for both live and virtual participants, including individuals with hearing or visual impairments? Are there language translation services available? Does the program have both visual and verbal queues? It is encouraged to turn on closed captioning.
- ❖ **Staff or Caregiver Assistance and Facilitation:** Are staff available to monitor the virtual participants and facilitate the program? Are caregivers or other companions able to assist and get technical assistance?
- ❖ **Design Meetings for All:** Think about activities and tasks with an equal eye towards live and virtual participants. For example, instead of using in-person cues (e.g., “raise your hand”), find ways to replicate for virtual participants via a chat, poll, or emoji feature (e.g., “thumbs up” or “hand raised” symbol).
- ❖ **Participant Engagement:** Programs that rely on pre-prepared content (such as recorded presentations) and a limited number of speakers may work well for hybrid. Programs and classes that require a lot of interaction and spontaneous dialogue may be more difficult. For larger forums, encourage online chat and discussion amongst virtual attendees to create a sense of community.
- ❖ **Reiterate:** Depending on the technology set-up, it may be difficult to hear when participants speak. Encourage the host to reiterate instructions and repeat questions and comments. Instructors can also ask participants to submit questions in writing so that the host can read the questions to all participants.

Examples of Hybrid Programs and Services

There are **countless examples from the Massachusetts aging services network where organizations have engaged in hybrid and virtual programming**. Below are just a few of the many exemplary and innovative ways to approach hybrid programming. *Please note, the Executive Office of Elder Affairs, the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative, or the Massachusetts Councils on Aging do not endorse any specific products or tools.*

- ❖ **Dennis Council on Aging:** Leveraged film class students to film senior center activities and broadcast those activities on cable access to share among surrounding communities.
- ❖ **Dracut Council on Aging:** Used cable access and YouTube to provide entertainment and educational activities, including the distribution of activity kits with grab-and-go meals to be used during the virtual programming.
- ❖ **Duxbury Council on Aging:** Sponsored its first Age and Dementia Friendly planning session via Owl and Zoom. Participants sat socially distanced - staggered across two rows. The presenter Zoomed in on a large screen and the Owl camera and microphone focused on the speakers in the room.
- ❖ **Grove Hall Senior Center in Dorchester:** Provided educational programming, including exercise and falls prevention, via Zoom using a laptop camera, microphone, and a large screen TV.
- ❖ **Fenway Community Health:** In-person participants also logged on to the virtual platform via their smart phones to allow for remote participants to see and hear all live participants.
- ❖ **Hingham Council on Aging:** Hosted weekly coffee groups on Zoom using the meeting Owl and Yeti microphone. Virtual participants and in-person participants met separately for the first half using Zoom breakout rooms and then came together for the second hour.
- ❖ **Martha's Vineyard Center for Living:** Hosted programming, including music, exercise for people living with dementia using Zoom and an Owl camera.
- ❖ **Greater Boston YMCA:** Offered hybrid fitness classes using Zoom, large monitors, and provided exercise equipment for remote use. The YMCA also created a short guide on safely participating in the class and using Zoom for virtual participants.

Other Resources and Tools

There are a myriad of **resources and tools regarding hybrid and virtual programming available from national and statewide organizations**, below are some additional tools and resources that may be helpful to review in planning for hybrid programs.

- ❖ [JF&CS Memory Café Toolkit and Virtual/Hybrid Supplement](#)
- ❖ [Massachusetts Library System – Coronavirus Resources for Libraries](#)
- ❖ [MABVI Access Technology Training](#)
- ❖ [MAPC Webinar – Exploring Together: Navigating Hybrid Engagement](#)
- ❖ [MCOA Virtual Senior Center](#)
- ❖ [NCOA Virtual Classes Guide for Professionals](#)
- ❖ [Preparing for the Future of Work in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts](#)
- ❖ [Telework Best Practice Guide](#)
- ❖ [Town of Stow – Evolution of Hybrid Meetings Presentation](#)
- ❖ [Virtual Meeting Best Practices](#)

Please contact Molly Evans (Molly.R.Evans@mass.gov) at the Executive Office of Elder Affairs with have any questions, comments, or ideas related to hybrid programs and services.