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## COVID-19 and the Digital Divide: Will Social Workers Help Bridge the Gap?

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Dear Editor-in-Chief,

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted almost every facet of life. For social work professionals, the implementation of social distancing policies have altered how we interact with clients. While many areas of practice have embraced remote offerings and telehealth, use of such methods with older adults continues to be a challenge. This letter is a call to action for gerontological social workers to make efforts to close the digital divide. This issue is a matter of social justice to ensure the information and resources from technology can be accessed by all. As a profession, we must make strides to ensure individuals of all ages have access to, and the ability to use, the technological resources available to support health and well-being.

The social distancing requirements necessary to reduce and slow the transmission of COVID-19 can be isolating for people of all ages. Older adults are particularly vulnerable to poorer health outcomes from COVID-19 while also being at heightened risk for loneliness and decreased social engagement. Further, those without Internet access/electronic equipment (i.e., smartphones, computers, tablets, etc.) may be unable to receive primary care and other medical services as many are exclusively being offered remotely. This can exacerbate health disparities among this population. During the spring 2020 shutdown in the United States, 1 in 6 older adults delayed or cancelled essential medical treatment due to COVID-19 and only 1 in 5 older adults received medical care by phone or video chat (NORC at the University of Chicago, 2020).

In addition to issues with accessing healthcare, contact with family and social supports is also limited or absent. Those in long term care facilities are unable to have visitors. The potential for poor mental health outcomes is high and we must be proactive in finding alternative support. While in-person interactions are restricted, people across the globe are turning to remote strategies for connection. For older adults, many experience limitations in utilizing electronic communication such as financial challenges to accessing/using technology and lack of knowledge and/or comfort to use technology (Charness, 2016; Czaja et al., 2006). Socioeconomic status also plays a substantial role in older adult Internet access (Gracia & Herrero, 2009). The Pew Research Center reports that only half of Americans 65

and older have home Internet (2017). This percentage falls to less than 30% for older adults aged 80 and older (Pew Research Center).

Given what we know about older adults' use of technology, social workers need to identify creative strategies to continue to engage this population. One such approach is supporting older adults through technology training (Leedahl et al., 2019; Mitzner et al., 2008). Evidence suggests that older adults would be more comfortable with and willing to adopt new technologies if they receive some type of formal training (Mitzner et al., 2008). Social workers should explore various strategies, many of which already exist, to assist individuals in learning and using new telehealth and social engagement technologies.

In addition to training, social workers can engage in advocacy efforts to expand technological access for older adults. The social work profession is dedicated to meeting the needs of all people, especially those who are vulnerable or living in poverty. COVID-19 brings to the forefront that many individuals are not receiving needed care and social services. Existing disadvantage seems to be heightened by current circumstances, with COVID disproportionately impacting racial minorities and those in lower socioeconomic areas. Advocacy efforts should also include efforts to enable equitable access to technology, given the increased role technology now plays in supporting health and wellbeing. While some forms of electronic equipment (i.e., non-smartphones and tablets) are becoming more affordable, they may be inaccessible to older adults with extremely limited or fixed financial resources. Further, the cost to access adequate phone minutes or Internet services continues to be a barrier. Efforts to expand access, provide discounted technology services to seniors, or electronic check-out libraries (e.g., "borrow a tablet") through avenues such as care facilities or senior centers should be explored to increase access to those that may wish to use electronic communication but have limited means.

Social workers must be prepared to respond to COVID-19 and play an active role in making sure basic needs are met and all individuals have access to the resources needed to support their health, including technology. COVID-19 is revealing inequities that we already knew existed, but this crisis has exposed that these disparities can no longer be ignored. Through ingenuity, social workers can ensure that the digital divide does not leave "those without" further behind.

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