



Telehealth Education for Older Adults in the Community

Summer - Fall 2024

InterFaith Works
1010 James St.
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About InterFaith Works

Mission Statement InterFaith Works affirms the dignity of each person and every faith tradition, builds racial and religious equity, and creates bridges of understanding among us.

The Digital Inclusion Program is dedicated to helping older adults safely and confidently learn to use devices like phones, tablets, and computers, so they can do more of the things they want and need to do in a digital world.

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Community Need

While the term “telehealth” has been around since the 1970s, it really came into the spotlight during the COVID-19 pandemic, with large health institutions conducting over 600 telehealth visits a day (Doraiswamy et al., 2020; Wosik et al., 2020). However, many healthcare providers were navigating this new virtual landscape on a “trial-and-error” basis. For older adults, this transition to virtual services posed unique challenges as, historically, many have felt uneasy about technology and accessing their health information online (Xie et al., 2020). Yet, the number of Medicare beneficiaries utilizing telehealth services increased from 13,000 before the pandemic to 1.7 million in April 2020, demonstrating that older adults were willing and able to adapt when necessary (Qin, 2022). This surge in telehealth usage also underscores that, contrary to common belief, older adults are not only capable but often eager to embrace new technologies and learn new skills, especially when it improves their access to essential services.

Objectives & Purpose of Our Toolkit

Our goal is to empower older adults to take control of their health through telehealth by addressing community attitudes and providing clear, easy-to-follow information. In creating this toolkit, we do not claim to be experts on telehealth, nor do we expect users of this content to be experts. Instead, our aim is to encourage and inspire people working in digital equity and aging services to do more to address the unique needs and barriers older adults face when using telehealth services. This may include new and useful partnerships with healthcare providers, librarians, educators, community centers, and more. The information and resources included in this toolkit should offer a helpful roadmap to get started.

- Gain insight into how older adults and health providers feel about telehealth and what concerns they have.
- Develop content that helps older adults and caregivers navigate technical challenges, like using devices and getting comfortable with them.

- Address human barriers, such as communication issues or the desire for face-to-face interaction, and offer ways to overcome these challenges.
- Share practical communication tips to help older patients, caregivers, and providers have smoother telehealth experiences.

Telehealth Case Study

Methods of Community Engagement

To meet our objectives, we used a variety of methods to gather community perspectives on telehealth, helping us create content that speaks to the specific needs and challenges older adults face when accessing these services. These engagement activities took place in the Summer and Fall of 2024.

Content Expert Interviews

We organized two separate 30-minute interviews with two geriatricians from SUNY Upstate Medical University's Department of Geriatrics: Dr. Sharon A. Brangman and Dr. Jeanne Bishop. During the interviews, questions were asked related to the clinician's personal experiences conducting telehealth visits during and since the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their understanding of current barriers and recommendations in guiding an older adult through a telehealth visit.

Focus Groups with Older Adults in the Community

To understand current perceptions of telehealth among older adults in the community, we led two one-hour focus groups. Focus groups were structured to begin with an ice-breaker question of describing, in one to two words, what "telehealth" is, followed by asking participants if they had or had not used telehealth before and what their experiences were. A final question was included to ask what participants would like to see in a future workshop on telehealth.

Pilot Workshop

To test the effectiveness of our content, we led a pilot workshop where older adults had the opportunity to learn more about telehealth, ask questions, and share their experiences. The workshop featured four different modules, ranging from an introduction to what telehealth is to how to effectively prepare for a telehealth visit. The first module included an opening ice-breaker activity to promote conversation between participants, and, to receive constructive feedback from workshop attendees, we included end-of-module check-ins with two open-ended questions.

Impact and Findings

Content Expert Interviews

Telehealth Should Prioritize Accessibility and Practical Use

- Both Dr. Brangman and Dr. Bishop emphasized that telehealth is best suited for well-established patients who do not require physical exams and only need routine maintenance visits.
- Dr. Brangman highlighted the importance of designing telehealth content that caters to older adults who face barriers such as lack of internet access or technical skills, rather than just focusing on the small percentage of tech-savvy older adults.

Caregiver Involvement Is Crucial for Older Adults with Cognitive Impairments

- Dr. Bishop emphasized the essential role of caregivers in telehealth visits, especially for patients with cognitive decline. She noted that these patients often struggle with virtual communication, even if they have good in-person connections with their doctors.
- Telehealth presents challenges for assessing cognitive function or detecting signs of elder abuse, as caregivers may prompt patients off-camera, reducing the ability to ensure patient privacy and accuracy.

The Future of Telehealth in Geriatric Care Faces Technological and Care Delivery Challenges

- Remote digital monitoring and integrative medicine offer promising directions for telehealth but are limited by internet access issues and the need for in-person care in certain specialties.
- Dr. Brangman shared that while future generations may adapt more easily to telehealth, the rapid pace of technological advancement currently leaves many older adults struggling to keep up.

Focus Groups

Focus group participant demographics (gender and race) are shown below in **Figures 1 and 2**.

Telehealth Experiences Vary Greatly Among Older Adults

- In the first focus group, experiences ranged from extensive telehealth use to no prior experience. Some participants (A and B) confidently navigated telehealth, using it for mental health support and medication management, while others (C and D) were more hesitant, with concerns about communication and accuracy.
- Participant C was wary after receiving a misdiagnosis over the phone, preferring in-person visits, while D expressed interest in learning more but felt unprepared due to inadequate technology classes.

Accessibility and Caregiver Support Are Key Concerns

- In the second focus group, participants like F and G shared how telehealth helped them manage their health conditions, including disabilities and immunocompromised status. F appreciated the comfort of virtual visits after a stroke, while G, who is legally blind, faced challenges with telehealth platforms being inaccessible for vision loss.
- Participant G underscored the importance of caregiver involvement, with G noting that they had no issues requesting privacy from their aide during telehealth visits.

Some Older Adults Strongly Prefer In-Person Care

- Participant H strongly opposed telehealth, expressing concern about losing the emotional connection found in face-to-face interactions. Many other participants shared similar sentiments, emphasizing the value of personal interaction in healthcare.

Pressing Needs Often Drive Telehealth Adoption

- Across both focus groups, a common theme was that older adults often adopt telehealth only when they have a pressing need. Once they gain digital skills and confidence, they may become advocates for telehealth and explore other online services.

Participants C, D, and E were identified as ideal candidates for the workshop, as they represent those who are eager to learn more about telehealth but may not have prior experience.

Focus Group Demographics (Gender)

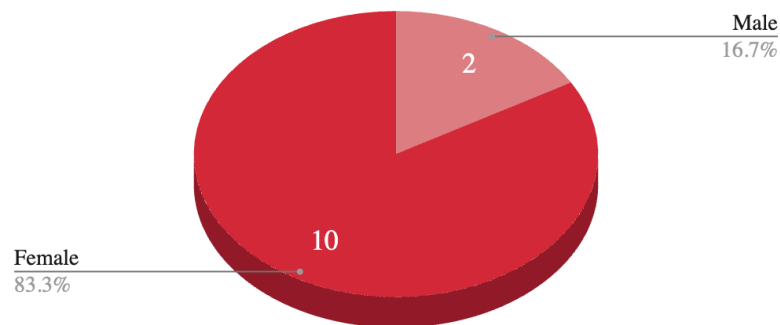


Figure 1. Focus Group Participant Gender Demographics

Focus Group Demographics (Race)

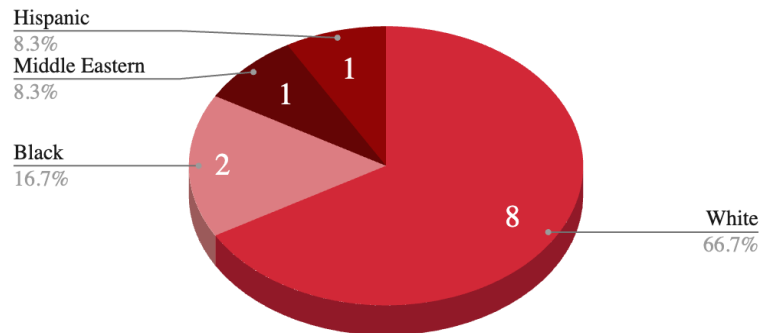


Figure 2. Focus Group Participant Race Demographics

Pilot Workshop

Participants A, C, D, and E from the first focus group attended the pilot telehealth workshop at InterFaith Works.

Interactive Activities Promote Engagement & Conversation

- Although the workshop participants already had a basic understanding of telehealth from the focus group, it was valuable to have them define telehealth again in their own words to determine if certain concepts needed to be reinforced.
- The participants' definitions are also great conversation starters, as you can always follow-up with, "Why do you think this?"

Spend Time Addressing Online Safety

- Introducing how to access a telehealth visit from a link and ensuring your camera and microphone are turned on, sparked a conversation led by participant A on internet safety.
- Participant A shared how they put tape or a Post-It-Note over their device cameras because scammers could "spy on them and steal their information."
- It is important to recognize how older adults may react to situations that may make them feel more vulnerable to scams. Be mindful of this and address any misconceptions, while affirming older adults' right to protect themselves against scams.

Hands-On Learning Works Best But May Not Always Be Possible

- Participant C emphasized during the focus group that they have the capacity to learn new digital skills if they are able to practice on their own device.
- Since accessing a patient portal involves viewing personal health information, this is not possible in a public workshop setting. Encourage participants to follow up with their provider's office to learn the basics of navigating their patient portal.

Resources and Tools

All Resources and Tools are available for download at InterFaithWorksCNY.org

Telehealth Workshop Presentation

Community Toolkit, “Understanding Telehealth: A Practical Guide for Older Adults and Their Caregivers in Onondaga County”

- A booklet that follows the content of the workshop presentation by providing an overview of telehealth and what to expect in a virtual visit.
- Includes local community resources that provide technology assistance and digital literacy courses, as well as best practices for patient advocacy that can be applied to both in-person and virtual visits with a doctor.

Simplified Checklist, “Steps to a Successful Telehealth Visit”

- A one-page visual checklist to help effectively prepare for a telehealth virtual visit, with a few simple steps to support an older adult in setting up their device and space.

Guide, “Telehealth Recommendations for Geriatric Clinicians”

- A short guide for geriatric clinicians, and all healthcare professionals who work with older adults, with reminders of what the clinician should “know,” “do,” and “ask” before introducing telehealth to a patient's care.
- For example, providers should “know” of any accessibility concerns a patient has (i.e., vision, cognition, hearing) that may limit their ability to engage in a visit and provide the appropriate accommodations.

Conclusion & Community Recommendations

Emerging Practices

From our community engagement methods, we identified the following as emerging practices for engaging older adults in telehealth education:

Tailor Telehealth Education to Meet Diverse Needs and Learning Styles

- Older adults vary widely in their familiarity with telehealth. Some are confident users, while others feel anxious or inexperienced.
- Provide a mix of introductory content for beginners and more advanced tips for those with some experience to ensure everyone feels included.

Incorporate Hands-On, Practical Learning

- Without violating the privacy of participants, interactive activities and hands-on practice with devices help older adults feel more comfortable using telehealth.

Foster Conversations About Preferences and Concerns

- Encourage open discussion about older adults' preferences for in-person versus virtual care, as many may prefer the personal connection of face-to-face visits.
- Validate these concerns while emphasizing the benefits of telehealth for those with mobility or transportation challenges.

Adapt to Changing Digital Competencies Over Time

- Recognize that many older adults are capable of learning new digital skills, but they may need extra time, encouragement, and support.
- As technology continues to evolve, ensure that educational materials are updated to reflect new tools and platforms while keeping older adults informed and confident.

Opportunities for Further Engagement

The following we identified as future directions for our work on telehealth that should be made a priority in the adaptation of our resources:

Involve Caregivers in the Learning Process

- Caregivers play a crucial role in helping older adults, especially those with cognitive impairments, navigate telehealth visits.
- Incorporating caregiver participation in telehealth education ensures they are prepared to support older adults during virtual healthcare interactions.

Work with Diverse Groups of Older Adults and Offer Translation

- Following the initial pilot workshop, we met with nine older adults from InterFaith Works' Older New Americans program.
- The conversation offered a new perspective on additional barriers faced by non-Native English speakers when accessing virtual health services, as the greatest barriers the Older New Americans' shared was language.
- Other adaptations should seek to translate the provided materials in languages that are relevant to the community, as these populations are at the greatest disadvantage of receiving information that can improve their health and well-being.

Policy Recommendations

Expand Access to Affordable Internet and Devices for Older Adults

Key Insight One of the primary barriers older adults face in accessing telehealth is the lack of affordable high-speed internet and devices. Many older adults, especially in rural or low-income areas, are unable to participate in telehealth due to this digital divide.

Recommendation Federal and state governments should expand funding for programs like the Affordable Connectivity Program and offer long-term, sustainable support to ensure that older adults have access to affordable broadband and devices.

Action Reinstate and expand subsidies for internet service and digital devices specifically for older adults, targeting underserved areas. Allocate funds to community centers and libraries to provide free or low-cost device lending programs.

Promote Digital Literacy Education for Older Adults

Key Insight Older adults who have not been integrated in our digital world need education and support to become comfortable with telehealth services. In our focus groups, several participants indicated a strong willingness to learn, but were limited by inadequate or ineffective training.

Recommendation Implement state- and federally-funded digital literacy programs tailored for older adults that provide hands-on support and ongoing mentorship to help them develop the skills needed to use telehealth platforms confidently.

Action Create local partnerships between healthcare organizations, senior centers, and technology training programs to offer regular workshops on telehealth and other essential digital skills. Integrate training into Medicare wellness visits.

Encourage Telehealth Providers to Adopt Accessibility Standards

Key Insight Telehealth platforms often overlook the diverse needs of older adults, such as those with vision, hearing, cognitive impairments, or limited digital skills. Accessibility issues were noted in our expert interviews and focus groups, including challenges with patient portals for those with vision loss.

Recommendation Mandate that all telehealth platforms comply with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, ensuring they are fully accessible to individuals with disabilities. This includes making patient portals easier to navigate with assistive technology like screen readers.

Action Develop and enforce minimum standards for telehealth platforms that cater to older adults, including larger text, simplified navigation, closed captioning, and real-time technical support during telehealth visits.

Integrate Caregiver Involvement in Telehealth Policies

Key Insight Many older adults rely on family caregivers during telehealth appointments, especially those with cognitive impairments. Policies need to reflect the important role that caregivers play in facilitating telehealth.

Recommendation Amend telehealth policy frameworks to encourage and support caregiver participation during virtual visits, including the development of caregiver training modules and guidelines to assist caregivers in engaging with telehealth effectively.

Action Introduce telehealth reimbursement policies for virtual visits that involve caregivers, ensuring their role is formally recognized and supported through Medicare and Medicaid.

Address Privacy and Security Concerns

Key Insight Many older adults in our focus groups expressed concerns about online privacy, especially around the risk of scams or sharing personal medical information during telehealth visits. These concerns hinder telehealth adoption.

Recommendation Strengthen privacy protections in telehealth policies to ensure that older adults feel secure using these services. Health institutions should be required to provide clear, plain-language privacy notices specific to telehealth services.

Action Launch national awareness campaigns that teach older adults how to safeguard their personal information during telehealth visits and recognize telehealth-related scams. Require telehealth platforms to include built-in security measures such as end-to-end encryption.

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