



Creating a Virtual Village

AGING
AHEAD 

September 11, 2024



Washington University in St. Louis

ACL Definition

ACL recognized the value of virtual meal programs during the pandemic

- [Tele or Virtual Nutrition Education for Older Adults \(acl.gov\)](#)
- [Health, Wellbeing and/or Social Connections in a Remote Environment](#)

Final Rule

- Recognizes direct services that happen in-person or virtually including multipurpose senior centers and direct services ([1321.3 Definitions](#))
- Congregate meals that happen in-person or virtually ([1321.87 and 1322.27](#)).

Other Virtual Programs

Virtual Gathering Space - Lanakila Pacific

- Nutrition Innovation Grant
- Device agnostic; users can also call in
- 3x/week

Northeast Iowa Area Agency on Aging

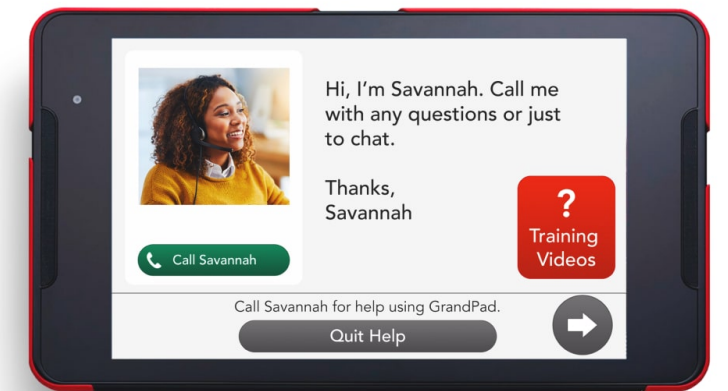
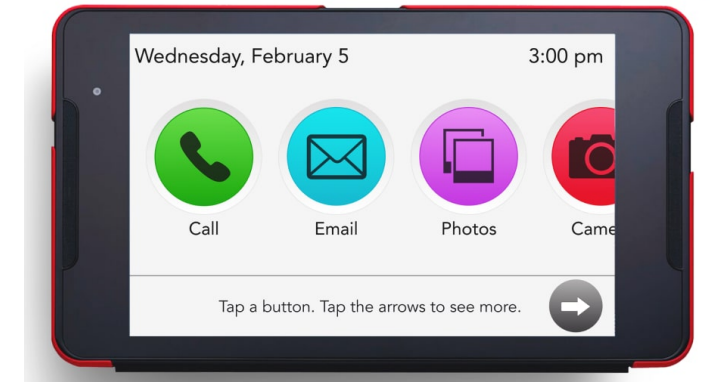
- Run 8-10 weeks
- Individuals may use their own device
- AAA distributes devices but participants return them after the program

SOWEGA Council on Aging

- NISC Program of Excellence

How it began

- Nearly 35,000 older adults in St. Louis County do not have digital access
- Progressive approach to responding to interests and needs of older adults in St. Louis
- Digital equity initiative by the St. Louis County Library
 - ARPA funds supported tablets in 2021
- Older adults most wanted a tablet because:
 - “I wanted to learn to use a tablet”
 - “I wanted to learn to use the internet”

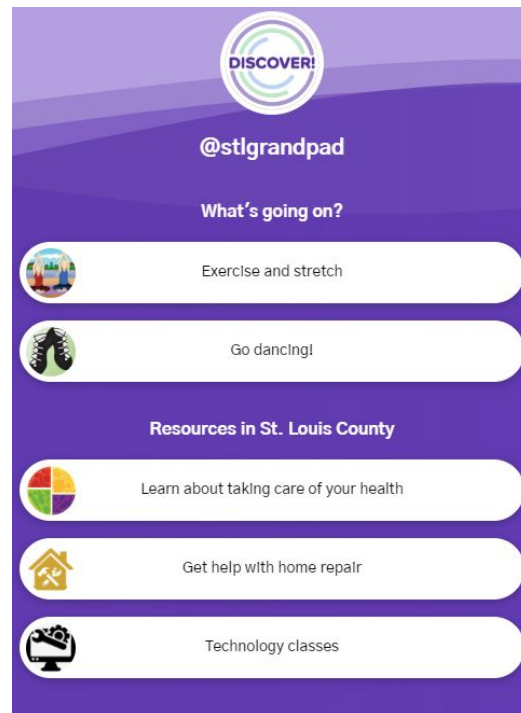


Woytus A. The St. Louis County Library's GrandPad program connected seniors when they needed it most. Now it wants to do more. 2022; <https://www.stlmag.com/family/grandpad/>. Accessed December 10, 2023.




GrandPad Overview. 2024; <https://www.grandpad.net/product-details/overview>. Accessed August 23, 2024.

How did it work?

- We surveyed users through their tablet to learn about their interests
- *Discover!* aimed to engage older adults with their interests and resources



What did we learn?

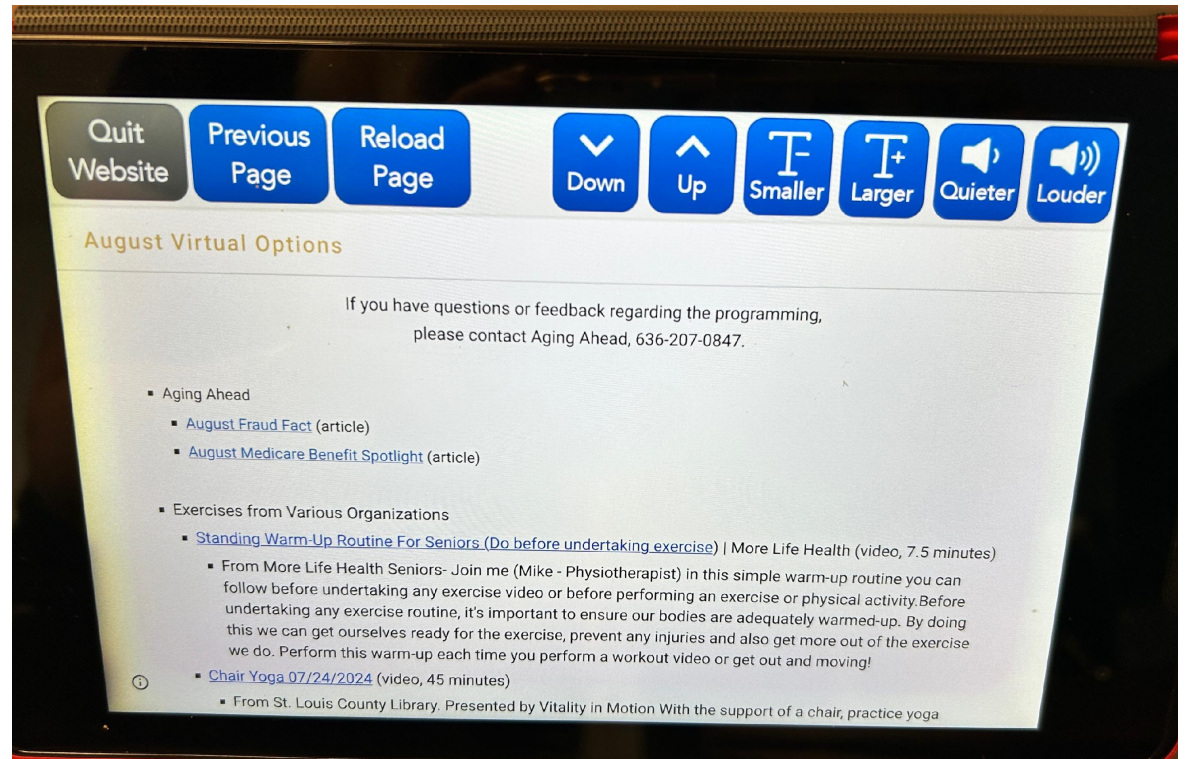
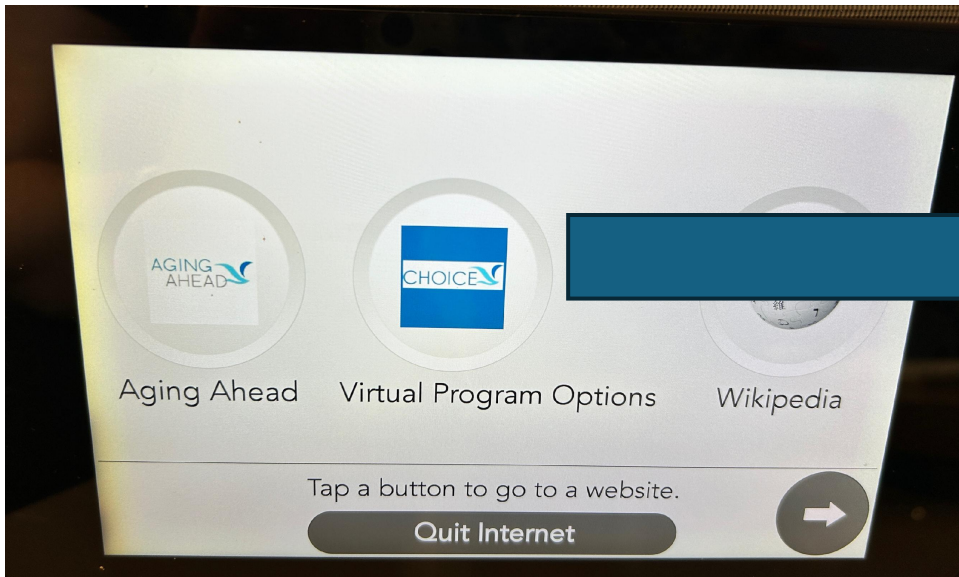
- Nearly all participants engaged in programming and would recommend it
 - Over 85% of participants engaged with the program, found it interesting, and would recommend the *Discover!* program
 - Over half shared information from *Discover!* with someone else or attended an event/used a resource
 - Of those, 72% reported that the resource was new to them or the event was something they hadn't tried before
- Participant depression scores decreased from before the program
 -  “I often feel that my life is empty”
 -  “I think it is wonderful to be alive now”
 -  “I am engaged and interested in my daily activities”

Aging Ahead Virtual Senior Center

- CHOICE at Aging Ahead brings the services of a Senior Center directly to older adults at Focal Points where older adults naturally congregate such as the public library, community centers, and now their homes via the Virtual Senior Center. CHOICE allows older adults to choose their meals and which educational and social programs they would like to attend.

Using the device, Virtual Senior Center Older Adults have access to

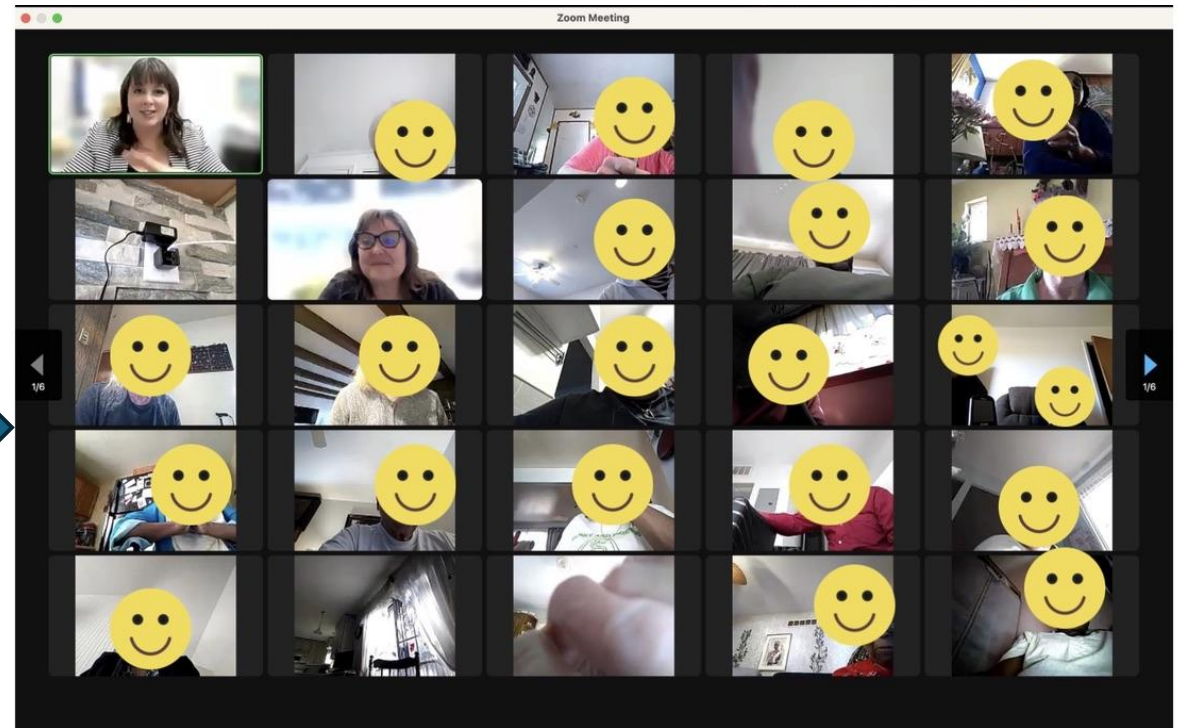
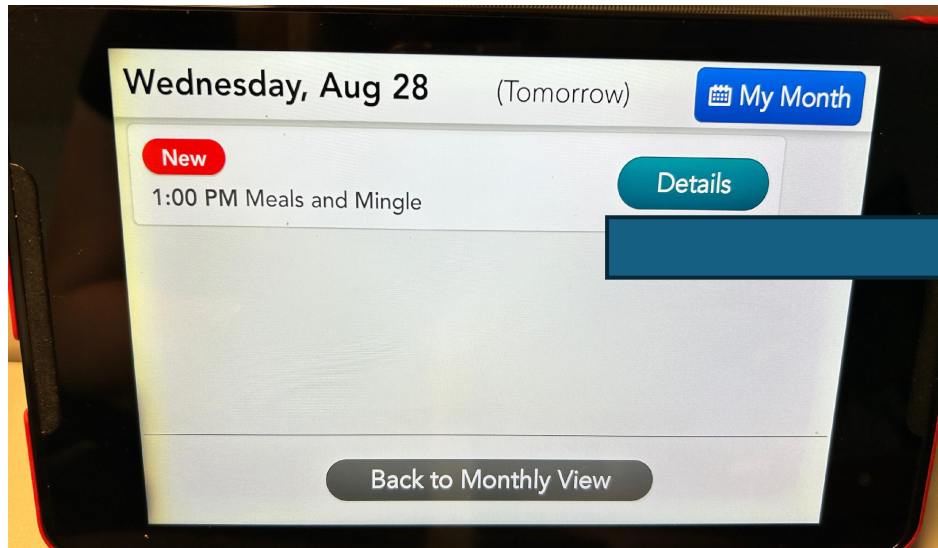
- Educational programming, including nutrition and exercise
- Social gatherings via Zoom
- Information on Aging Ahead Services
- Virtual Congregate Meals delivered to their door via third-party vendor



How does a Virtual Senior Center work?

Virtual Senior Center participants are expected to participate in a combination of virtual educational content and Zoom gatherings each month to remain active in the Virtual Senior Center.

- Virtual Congregate Meals
 - Participants receive virtual congregate meals delivered once a month directly to their door.
- Educational Content
 - Participants are provided with a list of educational content that covers a variety of topics and interests, including information on nutrition, exercise, Medicare benefits, online safety, and services available at Aging Ahead.
- Meals and Mingle
 - Participants are provided the opportunity to enjoy their lunch and gather on zoom to socialize and discuss the provided educational content in breakout rooms.



Virtual Senior Center funding

Currently funded by

- OAA IIIB for devices (consumable)
- OAA IIIC for congregate virtual meal
- OAA IIID for EBP virtual (as applicable)
- NIH Grant with WashU
- SSGDF
- Suggested contributions

Other potential funding sources

- Local foundations
- Technology grants



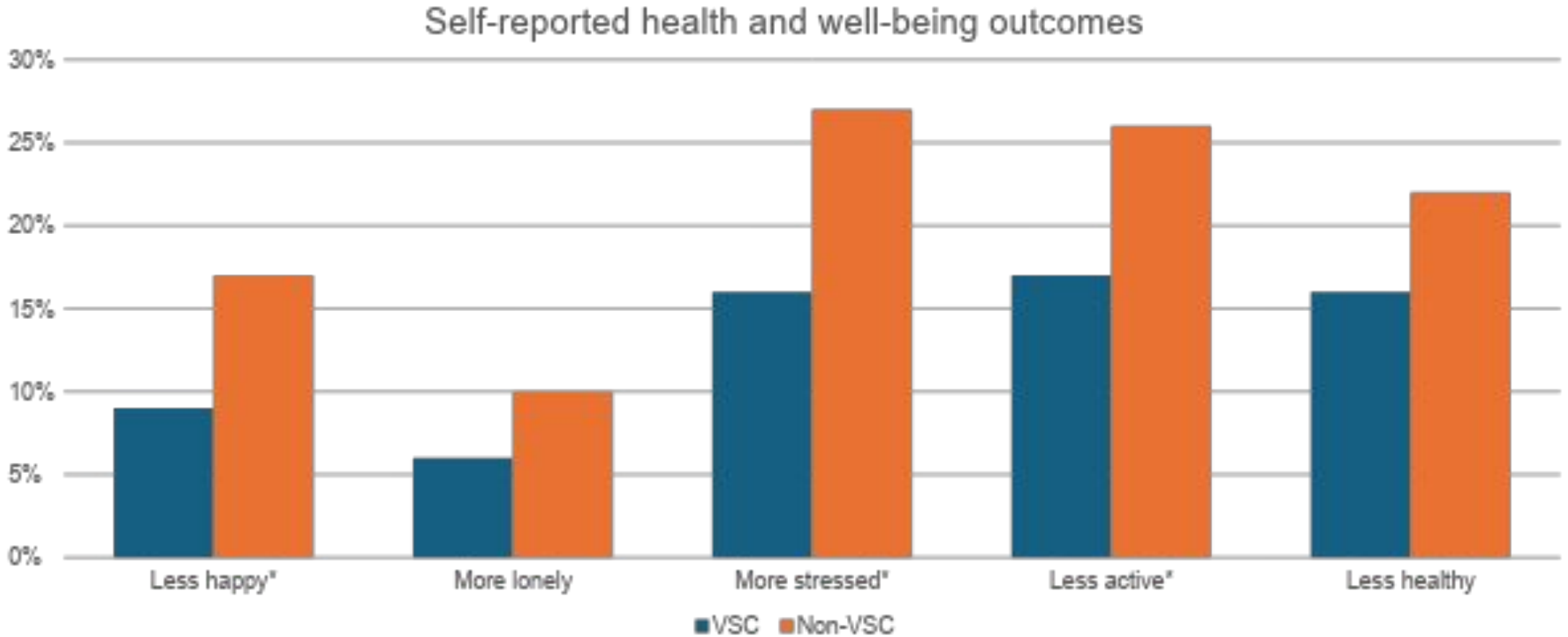
Lessons learned/ Obstacles

- Transition from the library program to the Aging Ahead program
- Tips for virtual congregate meals
- Tips for engaging clients in programming
- Capacity and staffing
- Zoom learning curve
- Language barriers
- Cognitive barriers

Benefits

- Outcomes were compared between VSC participants and home-delivered meal clients who were not participating in the VSC
- After 3 months, VSC participants were more likely than Non-VSC to say:
 - “My social relationships are supportive and rewarding”
 - “I think it is wonderful to be alive right now”
 - “I generally feel full of energy”
- VSC participants also reported better outcomes for health and well-being

Compared to 3 months ago...



*Significant difference between the VSC and Non-VSC groups

In their own words...

Family members of Virtual Senior Center participants shared how the Virtual Senior Center has impacted their family:

Using the [tablet] makes her think and helps exercise her brain (ie - the articles/videos/games/using the video call capability)...simply having to interact w/ a "computer". Being part of this program, she enjoys the nutritious Moms Meals.

It helps her learn technology, She uses it daily. It helps her answer questions she has. It gives her independence.

It kept her connected to family that were away at college which was a lifeline for her, she LOVES the games and content, and is enjoying the virtual programs she participates in. It is keeping her connected to others since she is in the house now and unable to get out in a social situation.

Next steps

- We will continue to provide tablets for the program for the upcoming year
- Virtual Senior Center website build is in progress aiming to expand access to anyone with an internet capable device
 - Website with login access
 - App like experience to navigate programs and resources
- Website development in consultation with current participants.
- Rigorous 12-month evaluation with a new group of participants
 - The evaluation will examine the impact of both the Virtual Senior Center program and device access to reducing digital inequity.
 - Evaluation findings will support data-informed decisions about Virtual Senior Center programming and long-term effects of the intervention on health and well-being.