

The following case study is the eighth in our series, highlighting one of our 56 federally-funded state and territory programs funded under the [Assistive Technology Act of 2004 \(P.L. 108-364\)](#). To learn more and locate your state/territory program, visit the [AT3 Center website](#).

COLORADO'S SOARR WITH TECHNOLOGY PROJECT

Older Adults to Receive Support With Using Devices

During the COVID-19 pandemic, technology offers a way for friends and family members to visit and stay connected despite social distancing. Unfortunately, these efforts are often hampered by barriers to technology older adults may experience. Individuals over age 65 are not digital natives, and many have sensory, motor, and/or cognitive impairments that make navigating touch screens, operating systems, and online environments difficult. In response, Colorado Assistive Technology (AT) Act Program, the Center for Inclusive Design and Engineering (CIDE), is developing [Supporting Older Adults through Relationships and Resources with Technology \(SOARR\)](#).



SOARR recruits and teaches technology mentors best practices for working with older adults. The project empowers aging services entities, family members, and other trusted individuals such as older adult peers, with trainings and tools to help older adults remain connected to their communities. According to the CDC, "Social isolation significantly increase[s] a person's risk of premature death from all causes, a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity."¹ Staying connected is foundational to overall well-being, but only if doing so is successful and satisfying.

About CIDE

The [Center for Inclusive Design and Engineering \(CIDE\)](#) began in 1989 as "Assistive Technology Partners" with federal funding from the Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act and the Elderly Act. It was rebranded as CIDE in 2018 to reflect its growth into an interdisciplinary center innovating technology solutions for challenges experienced by individuals with disabilities, including children and older adults. CIDE is housed within the Department of Bioengineering, College of Engineering Design and Computing at the University of Colorado Denver/Anschutz Medical Campus. Today it is a multi-faceted program encompassing research, engineering, industry, academics, and clinical services that engages with a worldwide community.

¹ "Loneliness and Social Isolation Linked to Serious Health Conditions," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed May 18, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/lonely-older-adults.html>.

SOARR's Beginnings

The idea for SOARR developed organically from the shared personal and professional experiences of the CIDE leadership team. "We went remote practically overnight," recalls AT Act Program Director Maureen Melonis. "And we saw first-hand the struggles of those we serve and heard directly from our own family members." In addition, CIDE is housed at the Anschutz Medical Campus, where telehealth accessibility became a topic of ongoing conversations and where medical students were paired with older adults to understand telehealth from the consumer side. Eventually, federal stimulus funding began pushing out technology to address remote access and social isolation. "But as every AT Act Program understands, technology alone often doesn't solve the problem," Melonis says. CIDE staff members were determined to learn what the research shows about teaching older adults to use technology. "We had to find a way to address this."

Steps to Project Inception

Conduct Preliminary Research. CIDE staff created a survey to gather pilot data and personal stories to understand the barriers older adults face. This preliminary data supported the critical need to provide training and supports to older adults. Interestingly, agency staff also identified their lack of knowledge about implementing technology with older adults as a significant barrier.

Discuss Needs with CIDE's Advisory Council. CIDE Advisory Council members agreed with the CIDE leadership team that older adults needed to have resources and supports custom-tailored to their specific needs. They suggested exploring funders with a focused priority to serve older adults. The Daniels Fund, a 501 3c organization, was selected and an application submitted.

Obtain Pilot Funding. CIDE's grant application used the preliminary survey's pilot data and personal stories to obtain initial funding. Once the project received additional funding, the initial survey was distributed statewide to over 1,700 individuals, Area Agencies on Aging, Meals on Wheels and to organizations such as home health agencies serving older adults. Those results helped further shape the project and to lay out the goals and objectives for SOARR.

The Daniels Fund, established by cable television pioneer Bill Daniels, is a private charitable foundation dedicated to making life better for the people of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming through its grants program, scholarship program, and ethics initiative. -- DanielsFund.org

Project Design

SOARR is using a train-the-trainer model to provide ongoing technology support to older adults across the state. SOARR's objectives are to train and disseminate resources to 50 technology mentors (Tech Mentors) who will, in turn, train 125 older adults. The Tech Mentors will also facilitate additional recruiting of another 200 mentors throughout the state. The SOARR project team is encouraging all of the Tech Mentors to train at least 5 older adults in their local community.

SOARR's partners include 20 regional and county aging service organizations, senior housing organizations, veteran volunteer organizations, and the CU Anschutz Multidisciplinary Center on Aging. [More partners are recruited at the SOARR website.](#)

Who are Tech Mentors?

Older adult peers, usually volunteers with aging services entities (Aging and Disability Resource Centers, Area Agencies on Aging, assisted living residences, etc.) CIDE has learned these agencies usually have someone they are already referring families to for technology assistance.

To support the Tech Mentors, CIDE is designing and developing instructional training modules. Complementing these modules is a website with support pages and links for everyday devices, platforms, and operating systems. Mentors will be able to find the support they need for navigating specific hardware, software, and built-in accessibility settings. The decision trees incorporated into the training modules will give guidance to the Tech Mentor on when they should refer a client to CIDE for alternative access methods should built-in accessibility prove inadequate for the older adult.

Melonis anticipates the project's impact will multiply as knowledge is shared among mentors, coaches, and other community members. "There are over 400,000 older adults in Colorado, and the state's population is growing," she observes. "More and more people are moving here to retire and be near family." SOARR should be valuable for years to come.

Current Staffing

- Less than one FTE spread across three staff members who have expertise in accessibility, community networks/outreach, and evaluation. "It's not enough staff, but we all share a passion for making this work," Melonis acknowledges.
- Two .5 FTE paid student interns: a graduate student in instructional design and an engineering student. "We have incredible student support," she says.

Project Development: Beta Phase

Statewide Advisory Committee Established. During this first year of start-up funding, CIDE's leadership drew on its existing relationships with aging services agencies to invite partners to the table, create buy-in, and establish a SOARR Advisory Committee. CIDE's director, Cathy Bodine, invited key individuals to an initial meeting. At the meeting, CIDE leadership listened to the experience attendees have with supporting older adults to use technology and offered to help solve common challenges, thereby securing interest in the advisory role.

The committee is comprised of older adults and individuals who work with older adults throughout the state. "They've been guiding us and educating us every step of the way," Melonis stresses.

Committee members meet quarterly as stakeholders in CIDE’s effort and help market the project. “They are all trying to address social isolation and loneliness, and most were delivering technology alone as the solution,” she says. “Everyone wants SOARR to succeed.”

Survey of Older Adults Completed. CIDE analyzed the survey results to explore the problem and better define their needs. Over 470 surveys were returned. Utilizing Meals On Wheels and Area Agency on Aging volunteers, who were already trusted and known by potential respondents, to hand-deliver the surveys increased response rates, Melonis stresses. A university evaluator helped develop the survey’s questions.

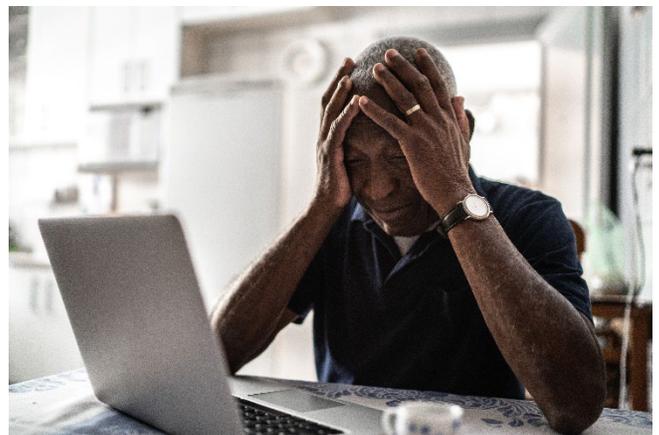
Existing Resources and Programs Researched. To avoid “recreating the wheel,” CIDE staff, led by Jim Sandstrum, reviewed existing resources for using devices. Links for using the accessibility features of various devices are now curated on the [SOARR website](#). CIDE also determined what resources don’t exist and reviewed the research for best practices for training older adults to use technology. “It’s not a one and done. It’s about a relationship,” observes Melonis.

“Pain Points” Identified. CIDE staff also researched the typical challenges older adults face with technology and how best to overcome them.

Tech Mentors Under Recruitment. Five pilot Tech Mentors are serving the project’s beta phase. A student intern is recruiting more from partner aging agencies.

Introductory Training Module Uploaded. CIDE is creating simple how-to tutorials and videos built around a case story of a woman asking questions of her mentor. These questions are structured to create a learning process for the Tech Mentor. To ensure success, CIDE employs an iterative development process. At the time of this writing, the introductory training module is being reviewed and tested by the pilot Tech Mentors. Additional modules are under development.

Logic Model Established. CIDE has created [a framework for SOARR](#) and evaluation and reporting processes. These are needed to pursue additional funding.



Takeaways From the Survey of Older Adults

- **Social isolation is a huge problem.** Before the pandemic, older adults in Colorado had been social in diverse ways: community groups, clubs, church, meeting friends and former coworkers at coffee shops and restaurants, and getting together for cards, crafts, and events. During the pandemic, respondents saw only caregivers and family (who might be the same person) and food and nutrition programs (e.g., Meals on Wheels). “That was it,” Melonis stresses. “Plus, a little bit of healthcare, but that’s all. There’s such a need, and it’s so important.”
- **Survey respondents often do not identify as "disabled,"** even when legally blind.

- **They do not identify as "seniors"** and prefer the term "older adults."
- **They do not identify as lonely.** "But if you ask them if they know someone who is lonely, they all say yes," Melonis notes.
- **Many have obtained technology but not support for using it.** Devices came through CARES Act funding, families, and caregivers, but with little or no training provided.
- **They do not know how to adjust accessibility settings.**
- **Their helpmates do not know about accessibility settings.**
- **Their helpmates do not know how to work with older adults and technology.**
- **Respondents prefer to learn technology from their peers** because peers, they feel, have more patience, and understand their challenges and safety concerns.
- **They want to learn primary platforms:** Zoom, email, Messenger, WhatsApp, and community message boards such as Next Door, etc.
- **They have concerns about technology replacing human interaction.**

Next Steps

- **Writing grants** for more funding. "The Daniels Fund has been great, and they're introducing us to their partners," Bodine says.
- **Recruiting Tech Mentors** from aging services agencies, assistive living residences, disability groups, and university programs serving older adults.
- **Compiling feedback** from Tech Mentors on the training modules, refining resources, and uploading completed modules to the SOARR website.
- **Continued marketing** among partner agencies and programs.

Lessons Learned ...

For Working With Older Adults:

Safety is an issue. Working with older adults and their families can expose credentials for banking and other services. The university is reviewing SOARR's volunteer guidelines and providing recommendations.

Expect tasks to take time. Older adults are not digitally connected, including many advisory committee members. The survey was often hand-delivered, which also helped overcome trust issues. Use existing trusted relationships and networks when working with older adults.

Listen and observe. “You can’t anticipate the goals they may have or the problems an older adult might be facing,” says Sandstrum. “You have to really listen and observe.” Slow down and let go of assumptions.

Relationships are more important than technology. Learning technology is a means to an end for older adults. Identify connections they want to make and how to get there as efficiently as possible.

For Project Development:

Dream bigger. Seek more funding upfront. CIDE needs a full-time SOARR project coordinator. More staff time is also required for the recruitment and outreach of Tech Mentors.

Start with an advisory committee. “We could not have done it without their guidance,” says Bodine. Having older adults at the table and individuals working with them makes all the difference.

Focus training on soft skills. Mentors have basic tech skills already. The gap is understanding how to work effectively with older adults, learning what works, and how to mentor, teach, listen, and have respect.

Finding Tech Mentors is more challenging than anticipated. Tech Mentors are older adults, and they are not meeting as often; everyone is guarded and out of practice with day-to-day social exchange. Plan for intensive recruitment.



Interested in Replicating SOARR in Your State or Territory?

CIDE anticipates making information about their SOARR training modules and curated resources available for other AT Act Programs within the next six months to a year. Programs will be encouraged to modify and replicate SOARR in their state or territory by focusing on building partnerships and establishing a network of Tech Mentors locally.

5/2022

Preparation of this publication was financed by Grant Number 90ATTA0001-05-00 from the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living under provisions of the Assistive Technology Act of 1998, as amended (Public Law 108-364)