Issue #1: Bridging the Digital Divide

The COVID-19 era has made the Digital Divide for older adults and adults with disabilities wider and deeper. The City's Digital Equity Plan lays out a clear framework for how to advance and bridge this divide, but the funding to really implement is lacking. While the need to keep children and young adults learning has shown we can rally resources when there is commitment, efforts to address the disconnectedness of older adults and adults with disabilities have lagged.

The $300,000 in the Board of Supervisor Add-back Budget is the first real step in a long time to expand the SF Connected Program.   An initial round of conversations with existing DAS SF Connected contractors and a few other stakeholders underscores how great COVID-19 impacts have been on service providers as well as individuals themselves. Here are some initial recommendations:

Leverage This Commitment – This is an important first step but only that. The need is so great, especially as many expect the COVID-19 era to last through most of 2021. So to get started, we say support the values and principles of the City's Digital Equity Plan and work to assure the needs of older adults and adults with disabilities are more equitability addressed, not just through DAS but through other Departments that service older adults and adults with disabilities – Department of Public Health, Department of Human Services, Mayor's Office of Economic and Workforce Development, Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development, Mayor's Office on Disability, Department of Technology, Human Rights Commission, Office of Racial Equity, Office of Financial Empowerment, Office of Digital Equity, and beyond.

Build on Existing Programs - DAS has five existing contractors who have been providing a range of services over many years. Originally, most of those services were provided in a network of computer labs across the City, but most of those labs have been closed by COVID-19 and any plans to re-open are slow in coming and very tentative. As a result, existing programs shifted to trying to keep people connected at home. However, one agency found, in a round of calls at the beginning of Shelter in Place to former computer training students, that about half did not have internet access at home. For those that did, providing remote learning was particularly challenging, especially for those trying to download software and learn new things, like how to use Zoom or connect with their health provider.   Where possible, providers have begun to try to expand access to devices and internet access, but this has been limited mostly because of a lack of funds and in-house expertise.

Following that:

Build on the experience and commitment of existing contractors - Community Tech Network, Community Living Campaign, Self-Help for the Elderly, Conard House, and Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired. These contracts are due to go to the DAS Commission in November. So, with guidance from DAS on how these funds could be used to advance equity related to neighborhood, race and ethnicity, disability or other factors, contractors would have their contract renewals amended for November Commission approval. Prior to that, contractors would work with DAS staff to update their scope of work and assure that these new funds help advance efforts at equity and use of new resources. Use approximately two-thirds of the funds, $200,000, to strengthen the existing providers and distributed in proportion of their current contracts based on successfully updated scope of work.

Set-aside funds for new initiatives and test new models – The San Francisco Tech Council has been highlighting efforts of other organizations and new start-ups looking to serve older adults and adults with disabilities. Set aside up to $100,00 to include other models and providers in a purchased service environment. The SF Tech Council has previous history funding and evaluating pilot projects with an earlier grant from Microsoft. This cross-sector organization has a strong communication focus via on-line and regular Zoom events highlighting issues and opportunities.

Build in a plan to develop uniform metrics - and assess the strengths and challenges in the existing SF Connected Program, including any new or expanded initiatives that arise over the coming year. This could be paid in part from these funds and could leverage other resources from a research partner.

Create a more robust outreach effort with the DAS Hub and 311 having better information to route those needing assistance to the best available partners related to need for internet access, devices, technical assistance, training, and support in the most appropriate language and knowledgeable about resources for those with disabilities. More centralized outreach and tracking would provide a better way to assess needs and gaps in services going forward.