
Working Out the Virtual Kinks

A Brief Introduction to Planning Virtual or Hybrid Events

By: [Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living](#)

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Introduction

Centers for Independent Living (CIL) are often a community hub where people with disabilities come to build social connections with peers, learn new skills, discover resources to assist them in living in the communities of their choice, and advocate for policies and supports that ensure that community means everyone. Across the country, the recent COVID-19 pandemic tested CILs' ability to serve as a community center for those with all types of disabilities. CILs, like many organizations across the country, had to dip their toes into the virtual waters, and for some, it was the first time. Although communities are re-opening for many in person events, as a movement, Independent Living (IL) needs to continue to offer virtual options for their consumers. Individuals who are at the highest risk for COVID-19 can still participate in events with a virtual option without risking exposure. Also, especially in rural America, access to transportation and reliable personal care assistance creates barriers for those who want to attend community events in person. Another bonus of virtual connections is the unique opportunity it creates for expanding peer networks of those in rural areas. Whereas someone may have been the only person in their small community they know with a disability or with shared experiences, virtual options allow your organization to connect people from many rural areas together for more robust experiences, and for your benefit to have more individuals attending your event.

Of course, we understand that there are barriers to virtual events as well; we know that the internet can be unpredictable, there are different access and accommodations that need to be sorted out, and the learning curve for getting consumers to adapt to new technology can sometimes be slow going. However, the disability community is no stranger to trying new things, even if it is hard, and getting a little creative when it comes to involving our community. We hope this brief will help your organization to work out some of the virtual kinks in your events.

Assessing Your Organizational Readiness for Online Events

As you consider moving your events to virtual or hybrid, think about your organizational readiness for completing your goals. Some guiding questions to discuss might be:

- Do we have a platform for holding meetings such as Google Meet, Zoom, Teams, or RingCentral?

- Make sure that you check into the free versus paid versions as there are differences. For example, Zoom’s free platform turns your meeting off at 40 minutes. To have it longer, you need to pay for it. You can access Zoom and other platforms like Microsoft Business 365 (Teams) at [Tech Soup](#) if you are a non-profit for steep discounts or sometimes for free.
- Do we have a way to have people ‘register’ or sign up for the event that can include questions such as accommodations needed and their contact information to follow up with them if needed?
- Do we have a budget set aside for accommodations such as American Sign Language (ASL), Spanish interpretation, captioning, and making materials accessible before sending them out ahead of time?
- Do we have anyone on staff that is comfortable with technology and maybe a self-proclaimed ‘techie’ who can help set up?
- If a hybrid event, do we have a plan for how audio will feed from the live event into the laptop for virtual attendees and then how the audio from the virtual event will be included for live attendees? You may want to look into enlisting the support of someone with technological expertise on your team to ensure that your computer settings are adjusted appropriately.
- Have we planned for proper staffing? You will need enough staff to be able to advance slides, monitor your chat, facilitate the conversation, and potentially be troubleshooting technology and accommodation issues with consumers. If doing a hybrid option, you will need to perform all the online tasks listed above and want at least one person to monitor the in-person event to make sure that everything seamlessly flows between the virtual and in-person event. You may want to consider how you will have the virtual attendees merge with the in-person event, such as projecting the screen with the online participants and materials for the in-person attendees to see. This may take an individual dedicated to the in-person screen to voice comments written in the chat for the in person attendees, and ensure that technology in the room works correctly.
 - Ensure that staff will feel comfortable multi-tasking, and if not, plan for more staff or volunteers to be available.
- Do we have the proper technology to support the event?
 - If the event is hybrid, make sure to confirm whether your accommodations team would be okay being streamed online and in person or if you will need two sets of accommodations. Some caption writers will be able to do both at the same time. Also, if you have a good camera lined up on the ASL interpreter, you might be able to do both, but always make sure to ask.
 - Examples of proper technology include laptops, [Owls](#), or personal devices such as individual’s cell phones or tablets. For larger events, you might want to consider using a planer app such as Microsoft Business 365 planner (free for non-profits through Tech Soup) or other project management software such as [MOCHA](#) to list out the details of your event



and who is in charge of each portion. Don't forget to make sure that the in-person event is also accessible. This [toolkit](#) from the Research and Training Center (RTC): Rural maybe useful in guiding your event planning.

Supporting Consumers

Some of your consumers may be proficient at accessing online events, while others may not be as comfortable or technology savvy. Being able to have patience, and some good question asking skills, can be useful in getting consumers connected.

CILs across the country have come up with many creative ways to get consumers' technology skills polished. They range from working one-on-one with individuals in their homes to offering classes in the CIL. Some examples include:

- Computer labs in the CIL:
 - This offers opportunities for consumers to become comfortable with the computer in a supported environment among peers or CIL staff to help answer questions as they come up.
- Technology lending libraries:
 - This offers opportunities for an individual to take a device home and practice using the device. Consider coming up with a lending library agreement on how you as an organization intend the device to be used by the consumer and what the terms around the lending are such as duration of time etc. Here is an [example](#) of an agreement from an Active Re-Entry IL Program.
- Teaching technology as an IL skill:
 - This can be done one-on-one with the consumer or as a class in your CIL! Get creative and make it fun.
 - Some examples of trainings and resources to pull from: [Healthy Community Living: Session 6, Technical Skills](#); [Meganga](#); [Senior Planet](#).

Don't forget that like any other service you would offer at your CIL, your online services have to be made accessible. Rooted in Rights created a great [resource](#) on supporting consumers with a variety of accommodation needs.

Broadband Internet Access

Access to broadband internet in rural areas can sometimes be a barrier. Don't forget that online options do not always mean folks have to be connected to the internet. Many online platforms such as Zoom, Teams, and Google Meet also have a call-in option. If consumers call in from a landline, make sure they know how to find one of the phone numbers for your event that is local for them to avoid long-distance costs. Another option is for your organization to explore online platforms that include toll-free number plans. Other CILs have worked around this issue by offering long-distance call gift cards for consumers. Some consumers may call-in using a cell phone with limited data or minutes. You can remind consumers to pay attention to their cell phone plan, so they don't



exceed plan limits. Make sure, if your consumer is calling in, that you send them the material ahead of time in the mail so that they can follow along with what you are doing.

Your organization may consider working with your [State Assistive Technology Program](#) or other programs to see if you can gain access to subsidized hot spots or data plans to offer to your consumers. This can be added to your technology lending library.

Consider working as an organization to advocate for better access to broadband in your rural community. This map helps lay out digital equity to consider for advocacy tools [Mapping Digital Equity in Every State \(census.gov\)](#).

With Community, We are Stronger: Resources

One of the silver linings of the pandemic is that many people began thinking about virtual events within the disability community. One thing we love at APRIL about being a part of our community is that people are willing to share what they know, because, we are not islands in a stream! This resource list is not exhaustive, but there are a few resources that may be helpful in your journey. Please note, that as technology updates are made, some of these materials may not be exact:

- [Tips for Taking CIL Group Services Online](#)
 - This is a resource APRIL wrote early in the pandemic with support from our partners at Ability 360.
- [Coordinating Accessible & Engaging Virtual Events for CILs and Statewide IL Councils \(SILC\): A Panel Discussion of Promising Practices](#)
 - Independent Living Research Utilization (ILRU), in partnership with APRIL and the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL), hosted a webinar with some tips for virtual event planning.
- [Tips For Using the Zoom Platforms](#)
 - If you scroll to the bottom of the page, The Nisonger Center at Ohio State University published some easy-to-understand instructions for using Zoom platforms to assist consumers in getting online.
- [Workshops on Healthy Community Living](#)
 - The RTC: Rural University of Montana, APRIL, and several CILs wrote a series of free workshops that are easy to run online or via hybrid options. Simply click and share! Note that facilitator training does cost, but the workshop materials are free.

Summary

The world of technology is always evolving and creating more opportunities for engaging consumers with disabilities. Deciding how to work out the virtual kinks of your event may change depending on the kind of event and the skill level of your consumers. If you would like assistance



to brainstorm your event, feel free to reach out Mary Willard from APRIL at Mwillard@april-rural.org.

