



## THE VALUE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Amanda Benton, Laura Erickson, and Sofi Martinez

While many of us are physically isolated or practicing safe social distancing during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, we may be able to rely on social capital to combat social isolation, access basic needs, and endure economic hardship. Social capital refers to the **connections, networks, or relationships** among people and the **value that arises** from them and can be accessed or mobilized to help individuals succeed in life.<sup>1</sup> Each individual can build and leverage their relationships to connect with and rely on others in times of need for both **tangible and intangible resources**, which may be particularly important during crises.<sup>2</sup>

Human services programs may help low-income participants build social capital as a key component of providing effective services. Despite the benefits social connections can offer, physical isolation or distance and other impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic present challenges to building and leveraging social capital. Programs may risk lost engagement if participants cannot meet in person during the crisis, for example, and these valuable connections may fade. However, a few key strategies may help programs prevent the loss of or strengthen participants' existing connections, though research suggests it may be somewhat more difficult to develop brand new relationships using virtual approaches.<sup>3</sup>

Current strategies for increasing social capital and improving well-being can be tailored in the following ways that allow programs to work remotely and/or practice and encourage social distancing while working to help overcome social isolation.<sup>4</sup>

### Use Technology to Build Relationships and Connect People to Resources

Programs may use social media or other forms of technology to connect participants, which can be especially important when in-person meetings and events are not possible. You might encourage participants to connect with each other over social media platforms or text message groups for emotional support, or your program could “tag” or post links to other community organizations through which participants can access resources like food or other supplies. Where possible, it may make sense to take advantage of technology that participants already use. However, some populations or activities (such as virtual case management<sup>5</sup>) may require a secure virtual platform.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/263491/What-is-Social-Capital.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aei.org/articles/civil-society-was-made-for-moments-like-this/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.aei.org/society-and-culture/digital-technology-maintains-social-capital/?mkt\\_tok=eyJpIjoiWkdZeFlUZzFNek15TUdRdyIsinQiOiJsR0pvQW1XRvY0bWMxbFwvcFFCWXBPUFh6eFFrU2Nsb2hyRlhG bWF2dVVEEdnRIOHIVSmtiblFDcXRac3h1YXMrUkxZOvU2d2t4ZxpOaFhsT2lWaTZyQUprQjdrNk9uTkgwblN5elk1MHdNQkpSYTIUW GVDYzZnWEwyVDM0TmRzWVYifQ%3D%3D](https://www.aei.org/society-and-culture/digital-technology-maintains-social-capital/?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWkdZeFlUZzFNek15TUdRdyIsinQiOiJsR0pvQW1XRvY0bWMxbFwvcFFCWXBPUFh6eFFrU2Nsb2hyRlhG bWF2dVVEEdnRIOHIVSmtiblFDcXRac3h1YXMrUkxZOvU2d2t4ZxpOaFhsT2lWaTZyQUprQjdrNk9uTkgwblN5elk1MHdNQkpSYTIUW GVDYzZnWEwyVDM0TmRzWVYifQ%3D%3D)

<sup>4</sup> In collaboration with the Research Triangle Institute and the University of North Carolina School of Government, we have identified some emerging social capital practices based on a program scan, case studies, site visits, and expert consultations. The emerging practices described here were frequently used for developing social capital in the human service organizations we reviewed. The practices are considered emerging—not best or promising—given that they are not based on rigorous evaluations.

<sup>5</sup> <https://aspe.hhs.gov/pdf-report/virtual-case-management>

### **Provide Structured Opportunity to Connect Remotely or while Socially Distancing**

While organic connections may be the most valuable relationships, it can be difficult to form natural connections while physically isolated and practicing social distancing. You may want to consider ways to provide a structured time for people to connect remotely or distantly, perhaps through an online game night for participants, a virtual mentoring session, or a socially-distanced small gathering. Although this may not feel natural at first, it can be a way for participants to further existing relationships or even meet new people. These connections can eventually take on a life of their own, potentially even outside your program context.

### **Offer Peer Groups Remotely in Non-Traditional Ways**

While it may not be possible to engage peer groups in person in the traditional sense, you could host sessions like peer support groups or cohort meetings virtually or over the phone. People may be in need of emotional support now more than ever, and these groups can offer the opportunity to connect over shared experiences and brainstorm ways to overcome challenges.<sup>6</sup> It is particularly important to keep privacy and security concerns in mind while considering such services, particularly for individuals who may be in immediate or increased danger such as victims of domestic violence and human trafficking, youth, or others who may be particularly vulnerable.

### **Engage Qualified Alumni and Other Individuals to Reach Out Remotely**

Program alumni or staff/volunteers with experiences similar to program participants may be uniquely positioned to connect to and understand the needs of those you serve. People who have faced similar challenges—such as homelessness, reentry from incarceration, or substance use—may be able to best anticipate or understand the challenges participants are experiencing now. They may be able to engage remotely to offer suggestions for the most appropriate ways to shift program activities or, while respecting social distancing guidelines, to connect in person with current participants to identify and help meet their needs, including emotional support.

While COVID-19 poses a number of challenges to people's physical health, mental health, and economic circumstances, human services programs can think creatively about ways to strengthen and leverage social capital during this time both remotely and while maintaining safe social distancing practices. Using technology, providing structured ways to connect, offering peer groups or other program activities in non-traditional ways, and engaging qualified alumni and individuals may allow people to strengthen and leverage connections and access tangible and intangible resources. For more information on:

- COVID-19 resources and guidance for human services programs, visit <https://aspe.hhs.gov/coronavirus>;
- How human services [programs](#) use social capital to improve well-being and economic resilience, visit <https://aspe.hhs.gov/social-capital>.

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/aspe-files/261791/promotingemploymentwellbeing.pdf>