

Together with Technology: Helping People with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities Maintain Community

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Abstract

Cooking sessions, gardening, arts and crafts, and music lessons—all activities the Merakey team provides through their Day Programs for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Merakey's Day Program includes activities, classes, and supports designed to build and maintain skills that promote positive social behavior and interpersonal competence and to increase independence and personal choice. These services provide a sense of belonging and connection for participants and give people the freedom to be themselves with their friends. But when the world stopped a year ago with the pandemic, the Merakey team knew they needed a new plan. The Virtual Day Program enabled Merakey to continue to provide benefits and supports to the people they serve in a new way.

Merakey, a Pennsylvania-based non-profit provider of health and human services, delivers care and supports to 40,000 people and their families in 12 states. Prior to the pandemic, Merakey provided Day Program services for 768 individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) at 16 locations throughout Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Virginia. Every week, the people in these programs came together to participate in structured activities to promote enrichment, socialization, and skill building. But in March 2020, Day Program services came to an abrupt halt due to COVID-19. Soon, days became weeks and weeks became months, and the pandemic inflicted a world of personal isolation on people everywhere, including those who formerly were able to gather for Merakey services.

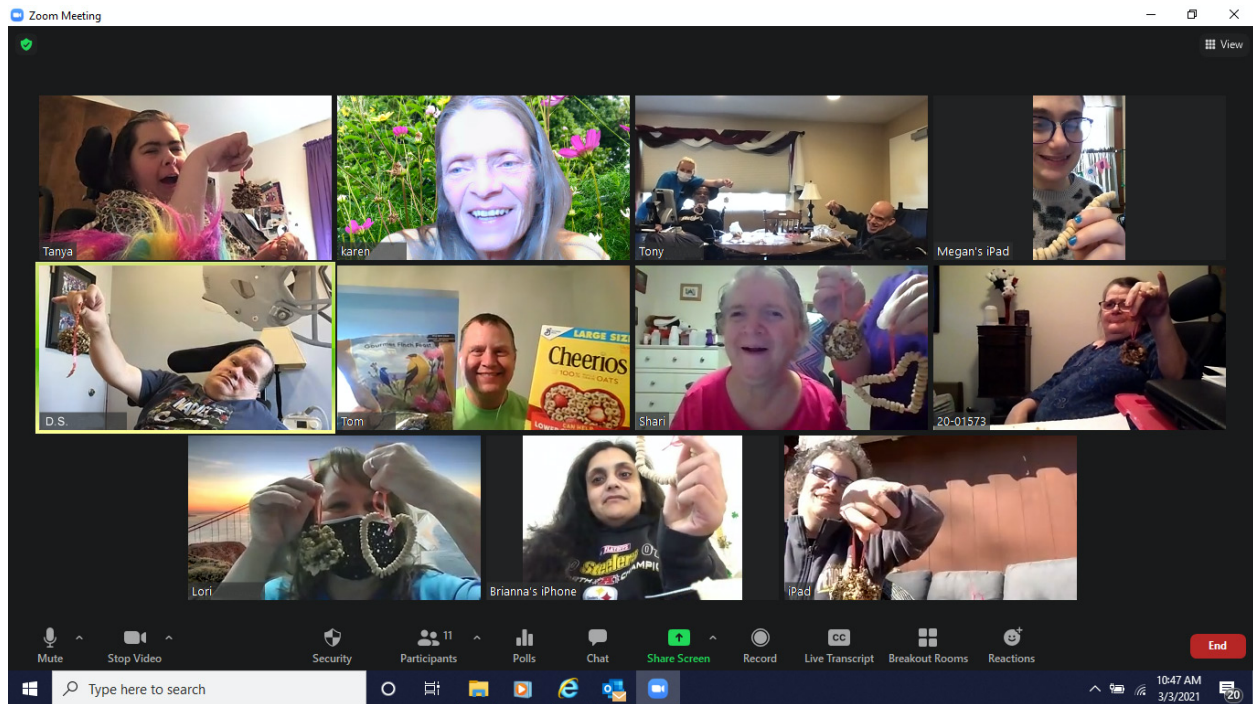


Figure 1: The Merakey Day Program attendees display the bird feeders they created during a virtual arts and crafts program

The Merakey team was quick to explore the virtual solutions to meet this challenge. In recent years, the Merakey team had promoted the use of technology throughout their programs. Individuals were familiarized with a computer learning process. Technology, such as iPads, tablets, cell phones, and other communication devices were introduced. Partnerships were formed with technology vendors to explore specific software programs to support specialized initiatives for individuals with IDD. All this set the stage for the Merakey team to expand technology-based services and find new ways to deliver Day Program services safely and effectively.

The first step was to identify what equipment was personally owned by the individuals being supported, what equipment was available at each home, and what equipment was needed. Individuals who participate in Day Program services live in group homes or with families and caregivers, which meant there were many different settings that needed to be considered. Merakey's Information Technology department and Innovation team assisted with getting people the technology they needed, creating and/or improving connectivity at each location, and ensuring that all devices were secured. Merakey utilized funding from the Merakey Foundation, program resources, grants, and other contributions to cover these infrastructure costs. Next, the team developed instructional tools and trainings to help the program teams who work with individuals every day to understand how to use the technology and how to train the individuals they support to use the technology. Zoom was agreed on as the best platform to bring people together because it is simple to use and widely available across multiple technologies.

Merakey's initial goal was to have a device available at each living area so that individuals had the opportunity to connect with family and friends. Leaders within the Day Program quickly began to coordinate efforts to implement a Zoom program to support social gatherings and device usage. The initial initiative expanded to include classes, groups, and activities to provide educational and social opportunities. As sessions were filled, new programming was established, eventually expanding to a full schedule of more than 60 sessions reaching over 225 individuals across Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

To ensure that individual needs are being met and people continue to be supported in meeting their goals, Day Program personnel meet with each individual to discuss their progress and growth, along with future outcomes, interests, and needs. Behavioral Specialists reach out to individuals in their living areas to review their status and promote interactive coping and adjusting discussions. Individuals attend scheduled classes each day based on their goals, interests, and preferences. Each class is carefully planned with several key considerations in mind:

- Conditions necessary for successful community inclusion and/or competitive integrated employment;
- Opportunities to develop social networks and connections while minimizing risk;
- Ability to emphasize, promote, and coordinate the use of technology as a resource and a means to minimize paid supports; and
- COVID-19-specific wellness and skill building activities and education on how to safely engage in community activities during a pandemic.

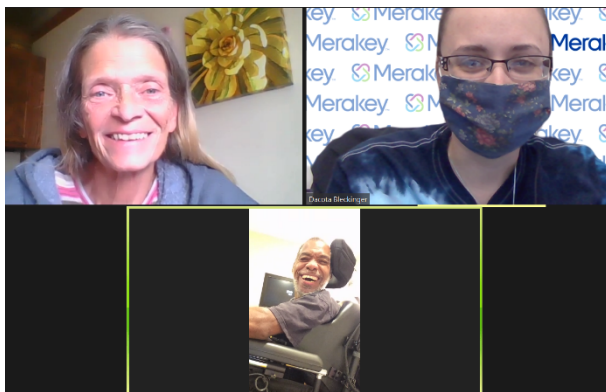


Figure 2: Merakey Day Program attendee Tony enjoying a virtual Zoom meeting. Tony says, "Wow we are staying right at home all the time we are on Zoom and Skyping all day long. And we really do love it so much! I do think that it brings us closer together."

Virtual programming is wide-ranging and is designed to translate as many activities as possible into the virtual space. Individuals with employment interests routinely meet virtually to discuss job skills, work training, and resume building. Special Olympians gather through Zoom to receive coaching guidance, training programs, and to participate in virtual competitions. Community connections have been brought online, including bi-monthly Zoom sessions with the Sisters of St. Joseph, one of Merakey's volunteer experiences centered on gardening and planting. COVID-19 safety training is included in every Zoom session and includes education on the basics of mask wearing, hand washing, disinfecting,

social distancing, and staying home.

Merakey also recognized the need to provide less structured activities and created a calendar of sessions that any program participants can join in addition to their designated sessions. This "open to all" programming includes music and dancing with a DJ, morning

exercise and movement, spiritual enrichment, and an arts and crafts program. A calendar for open sessions is shared with all Merakey Day programs across the state and has enabled new connections. Many activities are centered on bringing people together and helping to combat the isolation and monotony that many people are feeling because of the pandemic. Friday Fun Night was rolled out to include a rotating schedule of bingo, karaoke, game nights, and special events, like magic shows. Friendly competitions, such as gingerbread house making, snowman building, card making, and cookie baking, are regularly organized to build relationships.

Managing technology and virtual programming is a challenge with any online activity. To ensure that programs run smoothly, Merakey's Virtual Day Program model relies on a collaborative team that works together to manage all programming. This team includes three roles: Coordinators, Hosts, and Leads. The Coordinator is the point person to gather and maintain all device locations and capabilities, organize technical support as needed, and manage the scheduling of all Zoom sessions, personnel, and grouping assignments. The Host for each Zoom session manages the invitations, opens the meetings, troubleshoots during the sessions to provide assistance as needed, and supports the Lead during each session. The Leads design and manage the session content and encourages participation and socialization for the participants. The Lead is also responsible for providing the documentation that supports the service provided. With these three roles in place and working collaboratively, the sessions run smoothly and have been immensely successful. These roles are filled by Program Leads and Program Specialists. For some smaller programs, a Program Lead may need to step in and fill more than one role.

While funding initiatives for virtual services is a temporary Medicaid billable service, there are challenges. Medicaid requirements for specific staff to individual ratios limit the ability to bill for many of the sessions. To meet the requirements, groupings would require redistribution and down-sizing. This means the participants' choices would be limited, and the social environment would be altered.

Preliminary surveys of individuals and their families and caregivers have shown positive results. Being removed from services that allow for socialization and freedom has resulted in a high level of anxiety and depression. Using technology to reconnect with friends and the community has brought a great deal of joy and relief to an amazing group of individuals looking to regain some control of their lives. Individuals who have struggled to adjust to changes necessitated by the pandemic have found comfort in sharing their challenges virtually with a group of people feeling the same loss as they have felt. Since virtual services began, participants have been able to reconnect with friends, regain a sense of purpose, and continue to meet their goals.

As more people are vaccinated and communities begin to open up, Merakey is planning to continue providing virtual services in combination with community- and facility-based supports. The Virtual Day program has enabled new connections, created a greater sense of independence, and created the opportunity to learn new skills. The value of technology in helping individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities meet their goals and gain independence has been recognized for some time, but the pandemic has brought new benefits to the forefront.

Author Bios

Janet Harvilla has more than 35 years of experience at Merakey. Currently, Jan is the Program Director for Day Services, supporting more than 150 individuals. Over the years, Jan has filled various positions including live-in House Manager, Program Specialist and Administration. Jan participates in many committees including the Merakey Career Enhancement Program, Human Rights Co-Chairman, Communication and Technology, Alzheimer's/Dementia, Older Adult Advisory and several day program workgroups. During her time at Merakey, Jan has provided guidance to many Direct Support Professionals and various other positions to support initiatives and opportunities as we work to support individuals with IDD.

Robyn Cheskiewicz has been a member of the Merakey team since 1997. She served as a Behavior Specialist Consultant for 17 years and has worked as a Regional Clinical Director for the past 6 years supporting our teams across the southern and western parts of Pennsylvania.