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----News Release ----

### **Crossing the Digital Divide: Adult and Family Literacy Students Go Online**

“My life changed totally and forever.” Lili Vera describes the impact of two years working with her tutor, Gordon Williams. When she first arrived at the Portage County Literacy Council (PCLC), she was not able to help her three school-aged sons with their education and relied on an interpreter for doctors’ appointments. Now, she must learn new digital skills in order to continue improving her literacy skills.

In March 2020, the COVID pandemic shutdown in person tutoring.

**Lili refused to quit.** She said, “It was really important to me to continue. Somehow I have to figure it out how.” She and Gordon continued to connect through Zoom, emails, and text messages.

**Lili isn’t alone.** In 2020, Wisconsin Literacy’s coalition of community-based literacy agencies taught 15,500 adults and children. Currently, 1 in 7 Wisconsin adults are at the lowest literacy levels and struggle to fill out forms and follow printed and digital instructions.

Many of these literacy students, a majority of whom are also low-income parents, don’t have internet or computer access in their homes. Students may be willing and eager to continue participating but they lack WIFI, tablets, or laptops to continue online education. Some have only their cellphone to work with, small data plans, and even more limited digital skills.

“There will be an increased need for literacy services and job readiness skills, a need that the crisis has only magnified,” said Michele Erikson, Executive Director of Wisconsin Literacy. “If we do nothing to improve the literacy, numeracy, and digital problem-solving skills of Wisconsin’s workforce, we will see a decline in the health and earning power of its residents and the growth of its economy. We need to look at raising literacy levels to have a better recovery.”

Jon Gilgenbach, Executive Director of the Adult Learning Center (ALC) in Milwaukee, commented, “There’s a big divide between people who don’t have the digital skills. We can’t just say meet online and we’ll figure it out, but have to be able to meet them **here**” in person at the center. If students can’t figure out how to fill out the online forms, staff at ALC talk them through it on the phone.

Literacy nonprofit agencies have to get their adult students’ laptops, Chromebooks, or tablets and solve connectivity issues as well. Through a contract partnership between Wisconsin Literacy, Inc. and the Department of Children and Families, some literacy programs were able to provide for loan refurbished

laptops for students while they learn remotely. **But the funding and resources for these community-based literacy agencies aren't enough to meet this new demand.**

Digital barriers are not only limited to the adult students, but also the volunteer tutors. Volunteer tutors make up **94% of the instructors** for literacy students because many agencies have only part-time staff and instructors, or are all volunteer run. In addition, these tutors account for **130,796 educational hours** and save programs statewide **\$4,609,134 in instructional costs.**

To continue serving students, Wisconsin Literacy helped support the purchase of Zoom accounts and Internet Hotspots for those without access. The statewide agency also supported local literacy agencies needing to re-train current tutors for video conferencing, learning online and recruiting new tutors virtually. Training both existing and new tutors in online learning introduces them to how students might feel frustration or anxiety engaging in new technology for the first time.

Both literacy students and volunteer tutors gain valuable new skills. Jon Gilgenbach from ALC tells his students, "This is how it is for everybody working right now. **You are preparing yourselves for the modern work world.**"

Literacy staff think creatively to get their students online and keep them engaged. Dane County literacy agencies help students understand the new online tools through guided videos on YouTube or provide step-by-step written instructions to help their students work through technology problems.

**Gordon Williams, current tutor at PCLC, encourages other tutors to think about using Zoom now.** "I think Zoom is easy to learn. So making the leap is not as hairy and scary as some people may think." Nevertheless, Gordon looks forward to when they can meet back at the library again: "But in the meantime we're grateful to have tools that allow us to continue."

For those looking to support literacy programs statewide, you can find how to volunteer, advocate and donate at [wisconsinliteracy.org](http://wisconsinliteracy.org).

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Wisconsin Literacy, Inc. is a statewide coalition supporting the work of 70 member agencies by providing resources, training, health literacy and advocacy services to help advance the skills of limited literacy adults and English language learners and their families. For more information: [www.wisconsinliteracy.org](http://www.wisconsinliteracy.org) or email [Liz Fitzpatrick](mailto:Liz.Fitzpatrick@wisconsinliteracy.org).

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