



Independence Center Delivers More than 150 Smart Devices to Help Its Members

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ST. LOUIS – Independence Center, a local nonprofit dedicated to helping adults struggling with mental illness, handed out more than 150 free smart phones, tablets, Chromebooks and hot spots to its members thanks to a \$94,009 grant from the St. Louis

County CARES COVID-19 Humanitarian Response Fund. The devices will help ensure Independence Center's members have access to telehealth appointments and virtual group meetings while physically distancing due to COVID-19.

Rehabilitation Specialist Gavin McGrath said through the grant and a partnership with Sprint/T-Mobile, they are also providing six-months of free service for each device. Each tablet and smart phone has been pre-programmed by Independence Center staff members so people can gain access to virtual health services and easily find the applications they need. McGrath said in the past, these devices may have been a nice convenience for members, but now, they are a medical necessity.

“With everything going on in the midst of a global pandemic, we have seen one of the biggest changes in how we supply services for those experiencing mental illness ever,” said McGrath. “The core of our model is that we work side-by-side with people to help them gain independence and confidence and in order to do that, we now have to be able to connect to them virtually. If someone doesn't have technology and they are isolating at home, that can be a huge problem for their mental health so having a virtual connection is really essential right now.”

Independence Center's Clubhouse plays an integral role in its members' mental health recovery process by helping people regain the confidence lost by the stigma of mental illness. More than 180 members normally come to the Clubhouse each day to set goals, learn life skills, improve their health and interact with other people.

McGrath said when the pandemic started, 99% of its members lived below the poverty line and many did not have access to a phone, computer, or internet and had no means to access telehealth services. Over the last seven months, Independence Center rapidly adapted its “Work-Ordered Day Program” to function virtually and started working to ensure all of its members could connect virtually. Thanks in part to the CARES grant, Independence Center has now conducted more than 11,000 telehealth appointments spanning all programs.

Dianne Cleaves, an Independence Center member who has been quarantining since the pandemic began, said after Independence Center gave her a tablet, she started taking online classes and is preparing to take her HiSET (High School Equivalency Test).

“This is a big accomplishment for me. I'm doing something for myself and I'm proud of myself,” said Cleaves. “Right now, because I can't go anywhere, I needed to find something else to do because I miss my friends and the staff at Independence Center. It's been very hard on me. I really appreciate the technology Independence Center is giving me. It keeps me busy and makes me feel productive.”

Independence Center is a community-based rehabilitation program for adults with mental illness in the St. Louis area, built on the Clubhouse model of psychosocial rehabilitation. Its mission is to provide all the services and resources a person with a serious and persistent mental illness needs to manage their symptoms, find belonging and purpose and gain the independence to live a healthy, quality life. For more information about Independence Center, or to learn more about their services, go to www.independencecenter.org.