

SEE YOU ONLINE

Virtual learning with the ELCHC

By Jessica Salmond, ELCHC

The COVID-19 pandemic has dominated our lives this year and also changed many of the ways we have to do business.

At the Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough County (ELCHC), that's meant converting professional development trainings for child care providers from face-to-face learning events onto the web. It's taken some trial and error for everyone involved — both the trainers and the participants — but for some it's become a more accessible option for attendance.

Stacey Francois, IACET & Training Manager, said the Provider Relations team has been working hard to adapt to new technology and transition learning events to an online platform.

"We have strived to ensure that despite recent disruptions to our lives, quality learning events continue," Stacey said. "Our goal is to make online learning events dynamic, personalized and collaborative, and we here to help you through the process."

Since the ELCHC has had to convert to an online platform, more than 1,400 providers have attended Coalition Connection webinars and trainings.

"I've had a lot more participants attending, and we're reaching more people. If someone has family issues or transportation issues, this is a way for them to participate," said Jamie Harmon, the Region 5 Quality Specialist.

Online training is a more attractive option for those who may be more hesitant about participating in person and are more willing to join in the conversation in a virtual setting.

Jamie said she had to shift her perspective on participation once she started teaching online, as she's learned to rely on different tools to see if learners are engaged, rather than

"reading the room" of body language.

Jamie has incorporated participation measures such as taking polls through the webinar platform during her trainings. Through the webinar platform, there's even an option for breakout groups.

While the first few sessions of training were rough as everyone climbed the learning curve of virtual training, Jamie said she's "all about" the virtual option now.

"I've had very positive feedback, they've liked the option," she said. "It reaches a different style of learner and allows them to engage."

Jaime Bogdan, Director for Kids Club Early Learning Center, is exactly the kind of learner who has been thriving on the virtual platform. She's been in the field for 16 years and has spent many hours in face-to-face learning events with the Early Learning Coalition, but said the curriculum training she took online was "the best I've ever done." The online platform is helpful for her.

"I'm shy, I will not speak in front of others. But online I feel comfortable asking questions or answering other questions in the chat box," she said. "It allows me to engage more. And I learn a lot too."

Jaime was skeptical at first that she would adapt to online learning, but found she was able to concentrate better when she was at home rather than at a face-to-face training, where there may be more distractions.

Martha Aguiar, Region 2 Quality Specialist, said there was a learning curve for everyone getting used to the technology of online trainings, such as the steps for registering online. Some of the activities are less user-friendly on smart phones than computers, but overall the experience for her

and her trainees has been positive, and it's pushed her and other trainers to try something new. "There are a lot of steps but all in all I think it has been well received. Even the ones who say they still prefer face to face say they are pleasantly surprised by the ease of use and interaction," Martha said. "I think it is here to stay as an option at least."

For some, the online platform is an appreciated but not preferred option during the coronavirus pandemic.

Gretzin Sanchez, Director at the Achievement Center Dale Mabry, said while there have been some challenges, online training is a good option to have during the current situation.

"I think we do prefer the face-to-face trainings, but the situation is bad now and getting the online training is still good," Gretzin said.

Some instructors who are primarily Spanish speaking may find the virtual trainings in English more difficult to understand. During a face-to-face training there may be more opportunity for goals and materials or explanation of concepts to be translated into Spanish, she said.

"Most of the trainings are in English, sometimes it can get confusing," she said.

The technology side of the virtual platform was easy to adapt to, and accessible: even if someone doesn't have a computer or internet at home, they can still watch the training on their smart phones. She encourages her teachers to ask questions if they need more information.

"If I have a question I find the trainer and ask," Gretzin said.

Some online trainings have been held in Spanish. Similar to traditional learning events, if the ELCHC is alerted with enough advanced notice, materials can be translated ahead of time, or if there are enough people interested in taking a training in Spanish, accommodations can be made, Stacey said. The ELCHC team is working to provide even more online trainings in Spanish, too.

The ELCHC won't be abandoning the traditional face-to-face format completely — once a level of normalcy allows groups to meet safely, those traditional formats will resume. However, the convenience and strong participation in virtual trainings is a good sign that online learning also needs to continue into the future, even when a global pandemic doesn't mandate the platform switch.

"Online trainings will be something we keep," Stacey said.

TECH TIPS

ONLINE LEARNING PLATFORMS CAN BE A LEARNING CURVE FOR EVERYONE, TRAINERS AND TRAINEES ALIKE. HERE ARE SOME TIPS:

- **Registration is a two-step process. Make sure to sign up for the training in the LMS, but also register through GoTo Webinar so you can actually participate.**
- **Sometimes your audio may not connect automatically. Log out and log back into the training.**
- **If you have a question or need help, you can type in the question box. The trainer will answer your question.**
- **Don't forget to return to the LMS for the evaluation after you finish the training.**

Thank you to all of our online learners for your patience in trying this new learning experience with us! For those who have not tried, we hope to "see" you in an online learning event soon!