

Tele-intervention in Arizona: A Collaborative Success Story

Submitted by AZ Hands & Voices and AZ EHDI Program

Exceptional services are possible when three organizations, with a history of successful collaboration, flexible and creative individuals with a willingness to go above and beyond and experience in a recently completed tele-intervention project, and strategically available funding come together and respond to the unimaginable, even a global pandemic. In March 2020, the EAR Foundation of Arizona (EFAz), the Early Learning Program (ELP) and the Arizona Chapter of Hands & Voices (AZHV) combined their efforts to purchase technology, train and educate parents and staff, and implement exceptional early intervention services.

The EFAz is a not-for-profit organization that has been an integral part of Arizona Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (AzEHDI) since 1995. EFAz holds the federal EHDI grant for Arizona. In addition, EFAz supports early childhood screening and provides loaner and permanent hearing aids for children of all ages. Lylis Olsen works with EFAz and is the AzEHDI Coordinator. EFAz provided the funding for this project through a federal EHDI grant and organizational funds. EFAz purchased and configured a total of 120 laptops/tablets, 45 hotspots, and 70 SIM cards since the pandemic began. Most of this equipment was distributed in less than two weeks from conception of the project in March 2020. The quick turnaround was possible as EFAz is not encumbered by complicated state procurement systems due to its status as a not-for-profit organization. In October 2020, EFAz successfully procured additional funding through the CARES Act and expanded the program to include Deaf mentors and additional technology for difficult to reach families.

The ELP at the Arizona State Schools for the Deaf and the Blind (ASDB) is the 0-5 early intervention provider for Part C of IDEA in Arizona. Kendra Benedict is the statewide director for the program that serves families of children who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Deaf/Blind. Services are available statewide through a network of highly qualified providers with backgrounds in Deaf/Hard of Hearing education in early childhood. ELP staff had participated in a pilot project with EFAz 5 years prior that looked at providing tele-intervention services. Additionally, recently hired staff had experience with tele-intervention in other states. ELP rapidly developed professional webinars, training, and mentorship for staff to ensure successful tele-intervention services were implemented quickly.

The Arizona Hands & Voices (AZHV) Guide By Your Side program provides parent to parent support as well as deaf and hard of hearing guides statewide. During the pandemic AZHV quickly transitioned to a virtual model providing weekly (now monthly) Zoom meetings on various related topics as well as a virtual camp and other support services. Heidi Klomhaus is the executive director leading a group of well-trained parent guides who are dedicated and passionate about helping families. Parent guides assisted in distributing the equipment and more importantly, were invaluable in providing one-to-one troubleshooting and practice for parents across the state that were unfamiliar with Zoom, allowing EI providers to focus on service provision, not technical assistance.

Equipment was available for families to use for any service or activity related to their child's development. Some of these services and activities included AZHV What's up Wednesdays, Guide By Your Side services, Deaf Mentor Program, virtual DHH camp, Storybeatz literacy zoom events, and virtual medical and therapy visits.

The project was successful only because of the dedication, trust, and hard work of all the partners. Many things did not go smoothly or as expected! Resources and expertise were found in family members (Lylis' 26-year-old nephew), a techy parent, ASDB IT staff and others. Although we are moving back to in-person services there will always be families who are better served virtually. This project provided the opportunity to build and deepen relationships and accountability across three organizations which will carry over into all the things that they do together for the families in Arizona.