

## MUSIC THEME

**ROBIN: This is Reimagine Aging – an audio series exploring the innovations that help older adults thrive in Massachusetts, a state that’s committed to being age- and dementia friendly. I’m Robin Lipson, the Deputy Secretary of the Executive Office of Elder Affairs.**

## MUSIC THEME up

ROBIN: Increasingly, many of us use technology to manage our lives. We go online to pay bills, make doctors’ appointments, and order groceries.

ROBIN: When COVID-19 shrank our worlds, we Texted, Zoomed, and FaceTimed to stay in touch with family, friends, and co-workers.

Mary Magner: “The computer is so essential these days, it opens whole new worlds to us.”

But not everyone has access to these tools—which have become essential for social connection.

As we become more reliant on technology, the need for digital equity is growing. There are three components — affordable internet, access to devices and training on how to use them. These are important to all of us, including older adults.

ROBIN: In this episode, we listen in on two programs that promote digital equity by offering technology training for older adults. One helps those who are blind or visually impaired maintain their independence. The other fosters computer skills and intergenerational relationships.

**MUSIC ends**

ROBIN: It's mid-afternoon at the Patricia White Apartments in Brighton. The common room on the 2nd Floor buzzes with chatter. Teresa Yao stands before a large monitor instructing about a dozen residents in how to search Google.

Teresa Yao: Right when we search something, we want to be smart about the words that we're using to be as specific, or not, as possible for what you're looking for.

ROBIN: Everyone follows along on their laptops. When they hit a snag, two Boston College sophomores, Andrew Kolebuck, and Alex Han, are there to help them. Alex sits down next to Hilde Danso. She has a question.

Woman: See, a lot of things got in my drive, got saved in my drive without me not even knowing it.

Alex: You can definitely go in and delete those, and that will free up space.

Woman: You can delete things that are in your drive?

Alex: Yes.

Woman: Ohhhh...

ROBIN: The class is called Digital Dividends and is taught by a group called "Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly." The organization started in post-World War II France so older people could stay connected to their communities. The term "little brothers" refers to the belief that young people can play an important role in this effort. The Boston chapter connects older people to their communities by teaching them 21st-century digital skills.

Technology, says Andrew, is something many younger people like him take for granted. For example, when the pandemic hit:

ANDREW: We had FaceTime, we had Zoom, we had text, we had all these means of communication where I personally would sit in bed all day watching YouTube and [snaps] the day would go by like that, right? But, older adults, my grandparents included, they don't have that knowledge. They don't have those means, specifically lower-income older adults who live in this building, for instance. So we're trying to bridge that gap.

Teresa: All right so I think we can try searching for things and like looking at all the different tabs that Google has, okay? So I'm going to stop talking

ROBIN: Teresa Yao has been the Program Manager for Digital Dividends since it began in 2021. The program holds classes several times a week in senior public housing apartment buildings around Boston. Teresa says to be successful, they need to provide both training and access. And access begins with giving each person a free laptop.

Teresa: And we have a hotspot for internet access. Because not everyone has internet at home. And we also give a computer mouse because we've noticed in the first semester that we were teaching this, trackpads for arthritis users are really tough. So we, for everybody, we provide a wired mouse. So that's like the whole tech access piece. They get the devices so they have the things to learn on. Tech equity is the classes and the intergenerational like volunteers, teaching, building relationships, building comfort level with digital skills. So that's kind of how we create the program.

ROBIN: Teresa admits she was initially a little nervous – what if people showed up, took the computer but never came back for a class? As it turns out, she didn't have to worry – people were eager for both – although they had different motivations.

Theresa: There's like two camps of like older adults that kind of come to our class one is like, they haven't really worked with computers. And they see this as, oh, our program provides a Chromebook and hotspot for broadband access, this is a really good opportunity to try out a class for a skill that they haven't really worked on before.

ROBIN: That's the case for Nathaniel Freeman. He hasn't used computers very much, but he wanted to use his new laptop to send his blood glucose readings to his doctor. Teresa shows him a way to keep a digital log.

Teresa: So Google has a thing called Google Docs and that's like essentially a typewriter on your computer where you can keep track of a bunch of different notes. I think for your daily login you can do that. There you go

Nathaniel: Press documents?

Teresa: Documents, yeah. And that's where you can type in and track. So if you click on blank here, then you can type in your sugar level every day.

Nathaniel: Oh This is good.

Teresa: All right? And then let's title it

ROBIN: Teresa says there's a second group of older adults who are already familiar with computers because they had used them in their work life.

Teresa: but they want to stay up to date on technological developments on like, Oh, I've heard things like the cloud, what is that, and then just like learning new things about technology, and there's also older adults that literally just want to come to class so they can kind of be with their neighbors and just socialization.

Mary: Every time I come here, I learn something.

ROBIN: Mary Magner worked with computers for thirty years, but technology changes quickly, so she's looking for tips on using newer applications like Zoom.

Mary: These kids are wonderful. And look at what they bring to us. It's just a fantastic thing. The computer is so essential these days, it opens whole new worlds to us. And we're going nuts. We'd would be lost without these kids. They're fantastic.

Teresa: Mary here is like she's what I call an ambassador for our programs.

ROBIN: Again, Teresa Yao

Teresa: But sometimes we have an older adult that just, like, knows everyone in the building, and then they are really neighborly, normally, and then so, like Mary here, having her makes me feel like okay, she will help recruit people she'll tell people about our program. And then Mary also gives me confidence that if we were to ever stop teaching at Patricia White, if we expand or need to take a break at the site, whatever reason that I know, like having the ambassadors in your class is like okay, this is really fertile ground for kind of like a sustainable learning community.

ROBIN: The classes are designed to connect younger people with older adults. This semester, almost 30 students from area colleges and universities came to teach. Alex Han says students like her get school credit but also a chance to stretch themselves.

Alex: I'm not the most social person, and like, trying to get up in front of a bunch of people to talk is pretty intimidating for me. But one thing I'm actually pretty good at, I'd say, is technology. So I figured it would be a really good opportunity to blend something I knew I could like bring, and was more comfortable with, with also just learning how to sort of grow out of my shell, and try to teach a bunch of people. And it's also just really nice to interact with the older adults. They're probably one of the most welcoming crowds. So it makes going up a little bit less intimidating.

ROBIN: As for Andrew Kolebuck, this is his second year teaching Digital Dividends classes. He's now a student coordinator and is teaching three classes a week. At the end of one of his fall classes, he asked if anyone would be returning next semester.

Andrew: One of the older adults named Patricia, she said only if you're going to be here. And fast forward to this past Tuesday, when I walked into the room, all of them started clapping, it was just a roar of applause. And it just, it really just showed you, even past the technology aspect of it, you do really form like, deeper, you know, friendships, umm, that I really wasn't realizing I would benefit from going into this.

### **Music - Godmode**

ROBIN: Other organizations are working to improve broadband access. Earlier this year, the city of Pittsfield expanded its downtown public Wi-Fi network to provide free wireless to residents. And the Western Massachusetts Alliance for Digital Equity plans to use a \$5.1 million grant to expand their affordability connectivity program and remove other barriers. Funding comes from the Executive Office of Economic Development and the Massachusetts Broadband Institute.

### **Music- Low Light/Garden of Eden**

ROBIN: The pandemic sparked a surge in tech ownership among older adults. And that's continued. According to AARP, most people 50 years and older now use devices such as smartphones and tablets daily.

For some, technology has become critical to maintaining independence. As we age, for example, many people experience some form of vision loss. A few years ago, The Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired ... otherwise known as MABVI, began working with age-friendly community leaders to help them increase accessibility and provide education and resources.

As part of this age-friendly initiative, they began offering one-on-one tech training sessions across the state. This one is in Natick.

### **Music posts**

Emily: I'm Emily Carrington, and I'm here today to learn how to use the iPhone. So I'm not isolated from the world being blind.

ROBIN: Emily lost her sight at the age of 75. Tasks such as making a phone call, or checking the timer on her air fryer, used to be simple. Now, she uses assistive technology built into her smartphone to get things done. But today, she's got a problem she can't figure out.

Emily: And that's what I was going to ask you to help me with, with mail, because I couldn't get back to inbox.

ROBIN: Emily has brought her questions to Jerry Feliz, Director of Access Technology Training at MABVI.

Jerry: Okay, well, let's see. Let's, let's try to open mail.

Emily: Siri, open mail.

IPHONE: Mail, message content, learning how to do emails. Okay. actions available.

Jerry:: Can I see your phone?

Emily: Yeah [sighs]

Jerry: Okay...

ROBIN: Emily says before coming to Jerry, she had tried to get her problem solved the usual way:



Emily: We had two appointments at the Apple Store, and they had everybody but God come in, they didn't know what they were doing.  
[laughter]

Jerry: Well yeah, so here's the thing...

ROBIN: iPhones and android-based phones like Samsung Galaxy have features to help people with no or limited vision. Emily has a feature called "VoiceOver" on her phone that will read aloud her emails or text messages or websites. Another feature makes it possible to use gestures to navigate through apps or to return to a main menu without having to recognize the icons.

Jerry: Let's try this. Can you open your palm up for me? Okay, so this is a scrub gesture. It's kind of like a Z. We take two fingers and go left, right like that. Okay. All right. All right. I'm gonna open up an email message. Okay, so we're in a particular email, right? We don't want to be there.

ROBIN: Jerry shows Emily how to get to the list of *all* the emails in her inbox.

Jerry: So you're gonna do this gesture that I just did. You're gonna go like this really fast. It's almost like you're scrubbing dirt or scrubbing off dirt or something.

IPHONE: Content. See into messages unread. Gina Russo's reminder looks like

Jerry: yeah, so that's a, that's a scrub gesture. And that'll just take you back places and you can use that almost anywhere really.

ROBIN: Technology training is one of six services MABVI provides for older adults who have vision loss. This tech training began about six years ago when MABVI noticed those with low vision didn't have access to the same support as people who were

legally blind. Jerry has low vision himself and had to learn to adapt when the technology was more expensive.

Jerry: Assistive technology software started getting good, about 10 years ago, particularly with the invention of the iPhone. So now you had a hardware space, and you had the, the software, with software, like voiceover, zoom, the speech recognition piece, all embedded into a device you can carry in your hand, whereas before, you would need to pay significant amounts of money to get the type of assistance we're talking about, you know, between five to \$600 to \$3,000.

Emily: It's a great advantage. With my iPhone, I can sit at home and take care of a lot of personal business. Whereas if I had to use the regular phone, I can't. My fingers just don't go fast enough. So with Voiceover on the iPhone, I'm able to take care of a lot of things at home myself.

ROBIN: The goal of the training is to give people a set of skills plus confidence and independence, which have both emotional and practical benefits.

Emily: you know, my friends that I've had all my life? Well, they want to do everything for you. It's like, I'm blind, I'm not helpless. You know, I mean, they're only doing it out of pure love. You know, so you can't get mad at them.

ROBIN: Jerry says he's seen people walk into a training session overwhelmed and leave with a sense of relief. Learning a new piece of technology means they can still connect to parts of the world they thought were lost.

ROBIN: Besides smartphones, MABVI offers training on other devices such as screen readers, tactile media players, or special glasses for deciphering text. MABVI holds sessions in familiar places like Senior Centers and offers support in English and

Spanish and other languages. And they make a point of hiring trainers who have their own vision loss.

Jerry: So we've been able to create community. And that's, that's a big deal, you know, to be able to create community around, the vision loss really, you know, we don't focus on that when we gather together, but it's because of vision loss that we've gathered together, and how people overcome it and how people adjust and how people thrive and how people struggle. It's both the thriving, and the struggle at the same time. This is making a difference, it's just a reality, this is making a difference. And, I'm happy to be part of what that is.

## THEME MUSIC

To fully achieve digital equity, people need access to technology, training *and* reliable, affordable internet. Eliminating barriers to all three makes a real difference in the lives of older people. As we've heard in this episode – technology can be a key to social connection, access to the wider world, and personal independence.

**ROBIN: To hear more age- and dementia-friendly stories in this series visit [reimagineaging.net](https://reimagineaging.net). And to learn how your community can become more age- and dementia-friendly, visit [mass.gov/reimagineaging](https://mass.gov/reimagineaging). This story was produced with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs and the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative. Funding was provided by Point32Health Foundation. I'm Robin Lipson. Thank you for listening.**