

# **2020 Pandemic and Beyond:**

**How Literacy Network of South Berkshire  
can assure its sustainability for the duration  
of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond**

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## **INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS REPORT?**

In March of 2020, along with the rest of the nation and many parts of the world at large, the Literacy Network of South Berkshire (LitNet) responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by halting the delivery of its in-person, one-on-one tutoring, as well as all workshops and training sessions. Like the rest of the nation, LitNet continues to watch and wait to see how the pandemic will progress and in what ways it will continue to impact LitNet’s mission-driven services. The Board of Directors saw this downtime as a perfect opportunity to take a close look at its operations and posed the following question: *How can LitNet evolve to meet the challenges presented by the current COVID-19 pandemic and beyond?*

Given the challenges at hand, specifically the current and residual impact of COVID-19, LitNet’s newly appointed Executive Director, Leigh Doherty, conducted an analysis, “2020 Pandemic and Beyond: How Literacy Network of South Berkshire can assure its sustainability for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond,” in order to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on LitNet’s known model of tutoring and to share proposed ideas relating to tutors, students, staffing, teaching approaches, and training. *What follows is a synopsis of the report’s most significant findings.*

## **A BRIEF HISTORY**

Founded in 1991, LitNet’s current mission is to “transform the lives of adult learners, both immigrants and U.S.-born, through the power of literacy, education, and advocacy.” Services include free, individualized, one-on-one instruction in reading, high school equivalency test preparation, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and U.S. citizenship test preparation, delivered by a trained team of volunteer tutors. While LitNet literature does not state explicitly that the services provided are in-person, this was generally understood in pre-COVID-19 times.

LitNet’s model of services has benefited from the prevalence of an available, intelligent, caring, and engaged tutor pool. Berkshire County is populated by a high level of educated, retired professionals who care about giving to their community and supporting those who face struggles. In large part, most of the LitNet tutors go above and beyond to make their tutoring

partnerships a successful relationship that blossoms into a caring friendship and productive educational model.

According to 2014 U.S. Census data, south Berkshire County's immigrant population grew by 30% between 2009-2014. In 2014, the Census counted about 3,000 individuals in LitNet's primary service area who speak a language other than English at home. This has directly influenced the number of learners that LitNet serves.

## **THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE LITNET COMMUNITY**

### ***High Risk Populations***

According to the CDC, as one gets older, the risk of being hospitalized from the effects of COVID-19 increases. "Statistically, 8 out of 10 deaths due to COVID-19 in the USA have been adults over 65 years old." In light of this, the CDC recommends "older Americans limit interactions with people and to take precaution when they do." In light of this unsettling truth, and given the fact that LitNet's tutor base consists predominantly of older people, pausing one-on-one tutoring was a prudent organizational decision. As reported in a recent LitNet tutor survey, conducted in June 2020 preceding this analysis, many tutors cited that they would not be comfortable to begin in-person tutoring until a COVID-19 vaccine was developed and widely available and/or when the United States government affirms that society is safe to return to life as it was before COVID-19.

Similarly, the base of our learners receiving one-on-one tutoring from LitNet are immigrants to the United States. Immigrants have always been an integral part of the social and economic fabric of the country. They are known for typically taking on a predominant share of the front-line work in our nation such as caring for the sick, children, and the elderly. They tend to work in the service industry as well, making it not surprising that immigrant communities are now disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The vulnerability of LitNet students is a concern and further supports the decision to pause in-person tutoring.

LitNet immigrant learners have also been impacted during this pandemic by having children at home and trying to maintain a work schedule. Many tutors reported that they had lost touch

with their learners during the pandemic because their learners were now busier than ever and did not have time for regular lessons.

### ***Access to Technology***

A major concern in regards to virtual tutoring was that learners might not have adequate access to internet and/or devices, but based on the responses of the 70 tutors who responded to the June survey:

- 65% of LitNet learners have and use a smartphone.
- 59% of learners are comfortable with the use of technology.
- 77% of the tutors polled expressed comfort with technology.
- only 28% of tutors stated that they are willing to learn to tutor online, but 55% said that “maybe” they would be open to this approach depending on how it would work and what training might be offered.
- only 7% of the tutors polled stated that they are not interested or willing to transition into online tutoring.

## **LOOKING TO PEER ORGANIZATIONS**

In reaching out to some organizations with objectives and missions similar to LitNet, it was evident that a clear vision for the impact of COVID-19 is not yet transparent to any among us. Like LitNet, these organizations halted their normal services at the onset of the pandemic and were just beginning to consider and trial some new ideas. When conducting this report, we found it helpful to see what they were doing in order to shape our own vision moving forward.

Each peer organization contacted was feeling the impact of the pandemic on life as it was known within their organization and were not yet sure how their future would look. They were interested to see this report upon its completion and to remain in touch.

## **ADVANGES OF A DISTANCE LEARNING MODEL AND BLENDED LEARNING**

There are several potential advantages in adopting a distance learning model moving forward.

- First and foremost, a distance learning tutoring model provides the ability for tutors and learners to feel supported in remaining socially distant (in an effort to protect their physical and emotional health) as long as the pandemic remains an issue in society. LitNet will not place any pressure on tutors or learners to return to an in-person model.
- Working from home in a virtual manner cuts down on travel time for both tutor and learner, allows both parties to work from the comfort of their own home, and removes the potential stress of working together in a public place.
- Engaging in distance learning provides tutors and learners the opportunity to continue to grow their technology skills, ideally with support and training. When the pandemic ends, tutors and learners might choose a hybrid model voluntarily. Hopefully both tutors and learners will have gained greater comfort with technology skills, tools, and resources, which will then enhance their tutoring experience going forward.
- For learners, receiving tutoring virtually at home might be less costly and easier to arrange. Another advantage could be increased flexibility to schedule tutoring sessions around busy work schedules and childcare needs.
- A portion of LitNet tutors winter in Florida or other locales and have traditionally given up their tutoring for 3-4 months. Comfort with a distance learning model will allow specific tutor and learner pairs to maintain their partnership throughout the year, solidifying relationships and supporting learners in their consistent progress.

### ***Moving toward Blended Learning***

Blended learning combines the strengths of traditional, in-person tutoring (interpersonal connections, meaningful gestures, facial expressions, etc.) with new opportunities presented by

online platforms and resources. Ideally, a blended model is a more enhanced and engaged model than the in-person model alone. Blended learning is the ideal future for LitNet. This first phase of distance learning will serve to support all constituents to learn new, beneficial skills that can be a part of a new “forever” model for LitNet in the post-COVID-19 era.

## **RECOMMENDED ACTIONS AND A VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

- **Distance Learning Initiative**

Over the past several months, LitNet has spent time learning about the many ways some of our valued tutors have maintained their relationships with learners in a virtual manner during the course of the pandemic. We intend to build off of their experience and expertise to design and deliver relevant training for a group of other LitNet tutors interested in helping them feel confident about online teaching. We’ll introduce very simple tips about getting started, as well as more advanced methods for using online resources, to help LitNet tutors offer personalized, meaningful sessions.

Solidifying this new pedagogy can only serve to enrich and enhance LitNet’s tutoring model which, once we can be in-person again, we envision becoming a hybrid model, blending in-person tutoring with relevant online interactions as a supplement. The Distance Learning Initiative will include training, mentorship, and regular check-ins to help each tutor participant to meet success as they transition to this mode of tutoring. Once we know more about what tutors need to feel at their best while teaching in a virtual manner, we will expand our training opportunities to all interested LitNet tutors.

- **Lead Tutors**

As we prepare to begin our Distance Learning Initiative, our first step is to designate Lead Tutors. Whether tutoring for LitNet happens virtually or we return to an in-person model, the concept of Lead Tutors is one that will expand the access of support for all of LitNet’s valued tutors. Each Lead Tutor will be an experienced LitNet tutor who would have a Tutor Pod of between 6-8 tutors. Lead Tutors will hold quarterly virtual check-ins. The addition of Lead Tutors:

- could increase the sense of connection and support within the LitNet community.
- could provide an opportunity to recognize talented and committed tutors by inviting them to consider a more active role.
- would provide an extra layer of on-the-go training and accessible support typically provided solely by LitNet staff.

- **Tutor Town Halls**

Once there is a clear plan for how LitNet will remain the same and what new ideas will be adopted and on-boarded, it is recommended that virtual Tutor Town Halls be developed. These online meetings will be hosted by Board Members, LitNet staff, and/or by a Lead Tutor/tutor volunteer. The purpose of the Tutor Town Hall is to connect with the tutors, share the direction of the organization and answer related questions or concerns. Such a meeting would be carefully designed with rules of engagement for all participants.

The Tutor Town Hall would be designed to reignite a sense of connection and community, to inform and clarify next steps, to direct those who need greater support to an appropriate person or resource, and to celebrate “beginning again.”

Proposed content for the Tutor Town Halls:

- Share the results of the tutor survey
- Share Board-approved new ideas presented in this report
- Remind tutors that the Executive Director is available to provide support
- Share LitNet’s policy on social distancing (matches should only meet in-person if they can meet the stipulated standards which are guided by state regulations and mandates)

## **CONCLUSION**

This report has explored the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on how Literacy Network of South Berkshire provides its mission-related services now and in the future. Because LitNet’s key constituents are people who fall into two compromised populations, the elderly and

immigrants, our paramount concern is for their safety and well-being. LitNet's challenge is to decide how to recalculate its program of tutoring while maintaining the successful personal relationship between tutor and learner that is the hallmark of its teaching model, and for which it is widely known.

The recent LitNet tutor survey highlights the ongoing commitment of the LitNet tutors as well as their general willingness to enter into a new way of delivering tutoring in the face of the pandemic. This kind of commitment and positivism provides solid ground for LitNet to move forward. Selecting and creating clear strategic plans for each new idea will be key in moving smoothly into the next phase of the Literacy Network of South Berkshire's organizational history.