TO: Jessica Savage, Associate Director
FROM: Christopher Smith, Executive Director
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CC: Lindsay Blok, Senior Vice President
DATE: June 18, 2020
RE: *Virtual Events Resources & Recommendations*

Due to COVID-19 and the need for physical distancing, annual in-person fundraising events have had to be canceled or postponed. For many organizations, these events are a significant portion of their annual operating revenue and the main platform from which they advocate for their missions and celebrate the impact and success of their programs. Fundraisers that had been planning in-person annual fundraising events have had to be nimble and re-think the ways that they engage their donors and raise the philanthropic dollars needed to run their organizations.

East Harlem Tutorial Program, a CCS client partner in New York City, quickly pivoted their annual gala into a virtual appeal. When EHTP's development team realized that their annual gala would not be possible, they quickly brainstormed a way to replicate their annual gala online. They leveraged existing technology (online giving, Zoom, etc.), gathered a team of advocates, and rolled out a strong communications plan to publicize the virtual event with their community.

Ability Beyond, a CCS client partner working with people with disabilities in Connecticut, realized that the people they served were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and knew that they would need philanthropic dollars now more than ever. They quickly pivoted to an online emergency appeal to raise funds. They discuss the importance of gathering early support prior to the event to ensure its success.

Virtual events need to recognize the moment they are replacing. If it is an annual event, you may still be able to create a theme, send invitations and hold silent auctions. Make sure you focus first on the relational aspects of the event. Think about who you want to attend the event and invest more time planning how to use the event to educate about the organization and communicate about current challenges. If you have special attendees, such as celebrities or community leaders, make their attendance special and find a creative way to spotlight their presence.

Here are some articles that provide additional context and advice:

- **4-H turned a lively event fundraiser into a virtual fundraiser.** The event included space for celebrity appearances and big announcements. 4-H was still able to highlight corporate supporters.
- Other organizations have transformed annual gatherings to online events that take place over an extended period of time. Stretching out an event allows people to participate when they are available. Some events have also tried to recreate the networking aspects of large gatherings through breakout rooms.

From all these experiences, we can see that it is critical to think through the purpose, audience, timing, and method of hosting a virtual event for your organization. Here is an article that presents an *Assess-Decide-Communicate-Execute* framework. This framework is a great roadmap to use as you think prepare for your virtual event and will help ensure success.