

Miguel Chavez is currently a high school student living with autism. He and his younger sister are being raised by their guardian and grandmother Cindy. Miguel is a talented student who participates in both general education and special education through his local school district. In March of 2020, as schools rapidly transitioned to remote learning for all students, the Chavez family found themselves struggling to accommodate their new virtual learning. With Comcast's expansion of Internet Essentials, Cindy was able to provide the necessary internet connectivity both children required at an affordable cost. Until this time, the household did not have internet access or devices, other than Cindy's simple smartphone.

At the start of the last academic year, Miguel, his sister and grandmother made the difficult decision to continue remote learning for both students due to high-risk health concerns for each family member. This option was carefully considered, as the challenges related to remote learning extend beyond the affordability of internet connectivity. As mentioned, Miguel participates in both general and special education supports, in the remote environment the coordination of both services was difficult. Oftentimes Miguel found himself struggling to understand what lessons he was expected to log into and at what times, as the two instructional models were not effectively supporting his needs concurrently.

During this time, Miguel and Cindy struggled to remain engaged and manage the emotional challenges associated with the confusion and disconnection. To complicate matters further, the school issued device for remote learning is only authorized for school related work and only by Miguel. As Cindy does not have her own device or personal email account, she is unable to fully support Miguel within the virtual learning environment. Through advocacy supports provided by The AWC, these challenges were managed although not as effectively as would be preferred under different circumstances.

Unfortunately, and as witnessed by the Chavez family, the impacts of the digital divide have exponentially increased as a consequence of COVID-19. In response The AWC created the Inclusive Technology Access opportunity to provide devices to individuals with IDD and their families to support virtual engagement and combat the isolation faced by so many during these difficult times.

In an effort to better support Miguel and Cindy during these challenging times and beyond, The AWC assisted in bridging the digital divide for this family by providing them a Chromebook; allowing Cindy the access needed to support Miguel. Cindy received the device, already set up and with a personalized instruction manual via contactless delivery. She was supported in remote training on the device and her knowledge translated into better supports for both of her grandchildren.

As Miguel's school issued device is a Chromebook, the training provided to Cindy expanded her abilities to support Miguel as their devices were similar. Additionally, the family has no restrictions regarding the use of their personal device and, for the first time since the start of the pandemic, have the opportunity to socially engage with their community while participating in safer-at-home practices. The digital divide has isolated this family from most aspects of community inclusion and through Inclusive Technology Access, The AWC now virtually engages with the Chavez family once again.

It has been exciting for Miguel to have continuity in his remote access to therapies, by maintaining his participation through the summer with the family's device. He also prefers the larger screen, as it makes participating in his new favorite past time of online gaming easier and more fun. The social virtual connections Miguel has made has eased the challenges and isolation caused by the pandemic. The AWC is confident that digital access will provide many future opportunities for Miguel and his family.

“This is a huge blessing for our family. Although the school district provides a Chromebook for Miguel, they are unable to meet all of his needs. During the summer he was required to return the device; due to lack of access to telemedicine his therapies ceased. Additionally, our family has no social outlets without virtual participation due to our health risks. Having a family-owned device opens up those opportunities again. My grandkids can see their friends, even making new ones, and we can again participate in The Arc of Weld County’s services remotely. We are so grateful.”