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Dementia Caregiver Virtual Support Services – An Implementation Evaluation of Two Pragmatic Models during COVID-19

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Introduction: Caregiving for those living with dementia poses significant emotional and physical health challenges. Caregivers and their loved ones experienced heightened isolation and stress throughout the COVID-19 pandemic due to social distancing precautions. Typical social, respite, and in-home services were longer available. The Middle Tennessee Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program (GWEP) is a collaborative led by the Vanderbilt Center on Aging. Practicum activities evaluated multiple models of virtual caregiving supports, including implementation and adaptations during COVID-19, to inform future Middle Tennessee GWEP dementia caregiver support services.

Methods: We performed a mixed methods analysis of quantitative outcomes as well as a thematic analysis from semi-structured key stakeholder interviews. The Durham VA Research Team shared quantitative programmatic metrics. We interviewed virtual caregiver support group facilitators using a semi-structured guide developed using the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research constructs. The student gathered observational data during support groups to triangulate research findings.

Results: Caregiver feedback and interviews demonstrated that while virtual platforms can present challenges, older adults appreciated facilitators' expertise and reported enhanced connectedness. We found no significant impact on participants' PHQ-2 Caregiver Depression Scores and a slight increase in their Zarit Caregiver Stress scores. Barriers to success include limitations of virtual software interfaces, technological issues, and distractions from program delivery. *Geriatrics* published our subsequent manuscript detailing findings in September, and we presented findings at caregiving conferences across the U.S.

Conclusions: Our findings demonstrate virtual interventions are effective in addressing aspects of social isolation while acknowledging significant participation barriers. Dementia caregivers are highly susceptible to psychological and physical burden, and additional evidence is needed to enhance intervention access, scale-up, and sustainability. Our evaluation will be used to improve future dementia support activities through the Middle Tennessee GWEP.