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Considering Platforms for NH-ME LEND Program Delivery: Face-to-Face? Remote or Hybrid? Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

NH-ME LEND is a partnership among three universities, in two rural states, New Hampshire and Maine. The program is a collaboration amongst the UNH Institute on Disability, the University of Maine Center for Community Inclusion & Disability Studies, and Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. NH-ME LEND has a faculty of 20 representing 13 disciplines; and 18 long-term trainees each year.

About NH-ME LEND

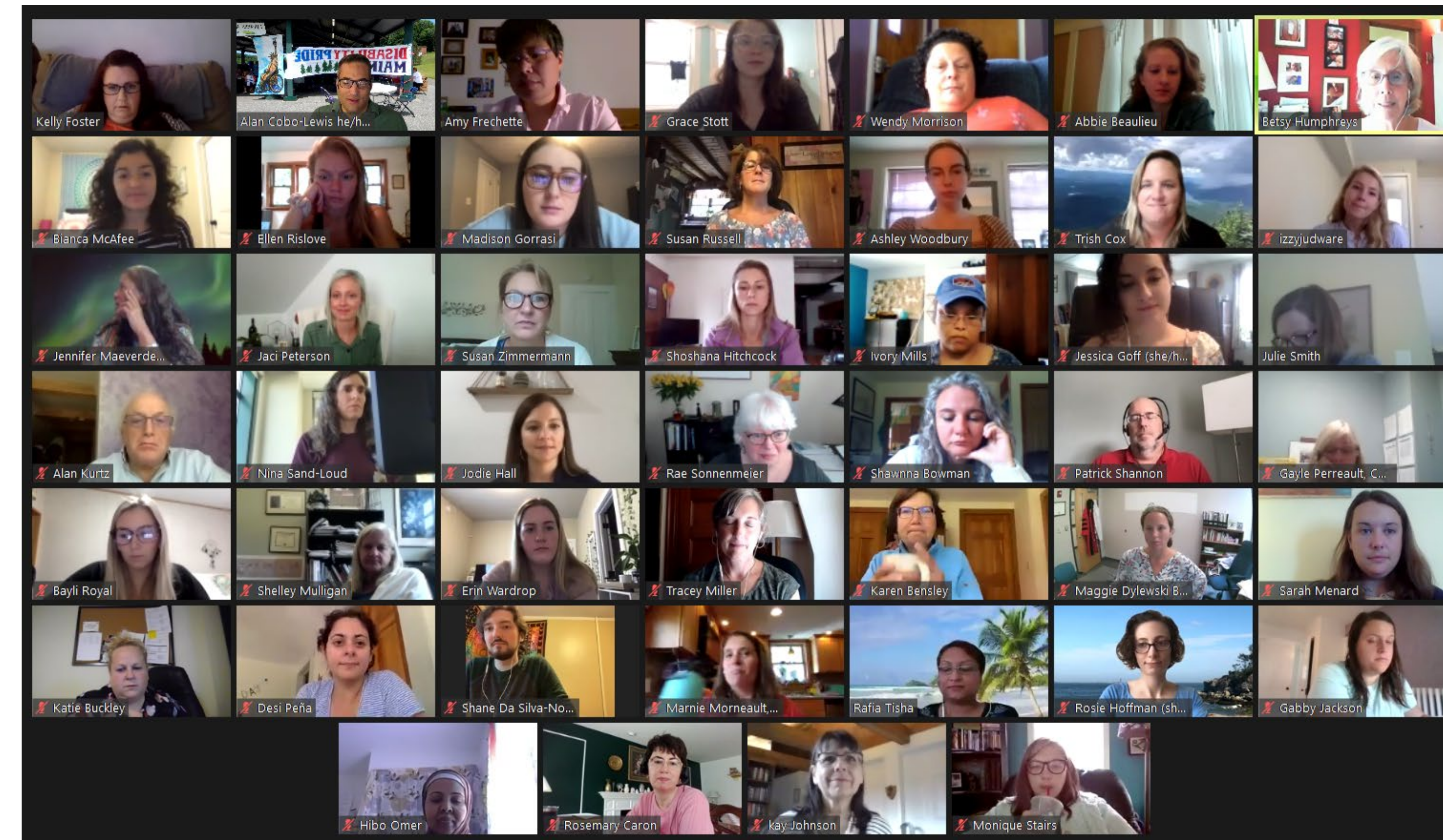
Long-term trainees engage in 100 hours of leadership training, 100 hours of interdisciplinary clinical training, and 100 hours of formal didactic training. The didactic component consists of a LEND seminar that is organized into six modules.

Since 2011, NH-ME LEND didactic and leadership training has utilized a synchronous distance learning platform to connect the two classrooms – one at UNH and one at UMaine. The monthly leadership intensive sessions were also delivered synchronously via distance learning. Leadership and clinical field placements were most frequently in-person.



Transitioning Platforms

In March 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NH-ME LEND Program transitioned all didactic, clinical, and leadership activities to a fully remote format. Initially program leadership and staff were concerned about the effects this change would have on overall program quality and trainee experience. As the pandemic persisted, it was clear that a fully remote program would be necessary during the 2020-2021 academic year. A first ever fully remote program year was completed in May 2021.



Benefits of Remote Platform

In the area of didactic instruction, the shift to a fully remote platform (all trainees in different locations via Zoom) had unexpected instructional benefits, including:

- Very few issues with classroom technology (all trainees and faculty being able to see and hear each other);
- Accessibility of the seminar and leadership intensives was improved (trainees from more remote parts of the 2 states; reduced travel time to campus classrooms; better audio and video accessibility);
- More cohesion of the cohort between New Hampshire and Maine trainees and faculty (trainees got to “see” each other on the screen instead of “seeing” a group in each state; sense of faculty “seeing” them individually rather than as a state)

Challenges of Remote Platform

In the areas of clinical and leadership field placements and team building, the shift to a fully remote platform, had challenges, including:

- Trainees and faculty missed the in-person training opportunities with community partners of clinical and leadership field placements;
- Trainees and faculty didn’t have the opportunity to get to know each other;
- Trainees and faculty missed team building and networking opportunities in face-to-face interactions.

Looking Ahead: Face-to-face? Remote? Or Hybrid?

As we approached 2021-2022 year, NH-ME LEND evaluated feedback from NH-ME LEND trainees, faculty, partners, and administrators to guide us in determining how to deliver the most effective programming during the 2021-2022 academic year and beyond.

NH-ME LEND transitioned to a hybrid platform in 2021-2022. The didactic instruction (LEND seminar and monthly leadership intensive sessions) is fully remote (all trainees and faculty in different locations via Zoom). The clinical and leadership placements are returning to face-to-face. The NH-ME LEND trainees and faculty will be together face-to-face three times (Fall boost and team building; Spring semester kick-off-event; End-of-the year Capstone Poster Session) during our LEND year.

