I never considered myself on the wrong side of the digital divide until five years ago. I can still remember how proud of myself I was when I set up my grandmother’s Yahoo email account back in the early 2000s. And like most people my age during that time, I flocked to the emerging social media community sparked by Friendster. Later, of course, my engagement teetered off when Facebook became “old hat.”

I’m now a professional in my early forties and I often find myself struggling to keep up with the progress of technology. For example, I moved from Microsoft’s Outlook to Google’s Gmail platform kicking and screaming And I still don’t fully trust the cloud so I back up multiple versions of the same document on my laptop. Yet I can’t deny how critical technology has been to FLY’s ability to adjust and respond to our communities’ and constituents' needs as shelter-in-place orders are extended here in the Bay Area to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

As a youth-serving organization on the frontlines, FLY is continuing our commitment to meet the needs of youth at the greatest risk of violence, crime, and incarceration by leveraging technology to provide services and support. We serve young people and communities in three Bay Area counties (Alameda, San Mateo, and Santa Clara), and while each community has its unique challenges, our ability to advance our mission while complying with the shelter-in-place orders is pretty remarkable across the board.

Here are some examples of this new normal for FLY:

- In one county, we’re using video conferencing to conduct intake assessments and develop service plans for two detained youths who were released from custody just as the shelter-in-place order went into effect. We continue to support the youth and their families, and they are coming to us (virtually) for information about the new order or to learn about resources to help them and their families stay safe.

- In another county, while courts remained open, our staff not only continued to provide advocacy on behalf of youth via video conferencing, but they arranged for the family and mentors of our youth to also be “present” during court hearings—an amazing sign
of support to the young person, and a signal to the courts that the community cares and will be present even during a pandemic!

- In a third county, youth still detained in long-term lock-up (six month or more) have access to Chromebooks and are using them to hold one-on-one counseling and planning sessions with our staff. We expect to resume our law-related education courses for youth in the facility within the week, and Juvenile Hall following soon after.

- Across all of our communities, we are coordinating efforts with local and national philanthropic partners to create access to financial resources for families who have suffered job loss or lost wages due to the economic collapse sparked by COVID-19.

A FLY Case Manager and a youth hold their regular one-on-one session virtually.

Our ability to be so responsive by using technology is no doubt a privilege of being in the Bay Area with Silicon Valley, the hub of technological innovation, literally at the geographical base of the region. We see how responsive tech companies are being to the needs of the moment by building out the capacity and infrastructure of their platforms to provide business continuity support during these unusual times.

But it has been the community at large coming together that makes the work of FLY and other nonprofits on the front lines possible. I’m talking about collaboration in the public/service sector: local and state governments, the philanthropic community, and coalition-building within the nonprofit sector itself. Then members of the corporate sector, including law firms and some financial institutions, are lending a hand to respond to the needs of the moment. It’s all awe-inspiring, and hopefully will spark new alliances among and across the conventional borders of business and the social sector in service to the greater public good.
As we hunker down and plan for the unprecedented (and perhaps the unimaginable), we lean into the unknown feeling connected and ready to respond as we work to adapt to our new normal. The concept of virtual reality has been around since the 80s with popular sci-fi movies such as Total Recall, but the concept make take on a whole new meaning as we work together to get on the other side of this pandemic.