

As with many of our self-advocate community members, Anthony Dorsey-Kountz has a larger-than-life personality with a zest for community access and inclusion. Anthony has only been a member of The AWC for a few years, but few members have been as active as he in such a short time. He has participated in numerous community outreach events hosted by The AWC along with becoming an active member of The AWC Board of Directors. His is a vital participant in our membership committee and is committed to ensuring everyone knows about the invaluable no-cost advocacy services The AWC provides to our communities. There are few things more satisfying than to see Anthony's face light up, as he shares his personal experiences as a person with disabilities living in an ever increasingly inclusive community.

However, as COVID-19 transcended upon everyone, Anthony found himself challenged with lack of digital access in a community deficient in physical accessibility due to safer-at-home mandates. At the onset of the pandemic in Colorado, Anthony's Medicaid provided cellphone commenced working. Abruptly Anthony became completely isolated from his community. Anthony's previous ability to access community services in-person were severed and he was unable to determine how to obtain supports without his phone. The lack of connectivity eliminated Anthony's access to wavier based services, medical appointments, advocacy supports and participation as an invaluable member of The AWC Board of Directors and community outreach participant. As the community began to reopen, Anthony was finally able to access a phone at a local library to connect with The AWC, as our agency physical offices remained closed. However, the challenges of public access to a phone remained constant, as Anthony had to hope the facility would be open on the day he traveled by bus to the location, appeal to an employee to allow his access to the phone and count on someone answering his call, as he was unable to leave message with a return call phone number. Anthony admits this time was very lonely and he felt "cut off" from the world.

Eventually, Anthony was finally provided a new Medicaid cellphone. The new device allowed Anthony access to vital services and reengage with The AWC. Anthony is no longer missing medical appointments, meetings with his case manager about available IDD services or spending time socializing with his family and friends across the community. Anthony's excitement to again participate in his community can only be marveled by the excitement he has to learn how to better use his new phone. The new device allowed him access to board meetings via Zoom and attend various opportunities that had transitioned to virtual platforms such as the new Project Illumination, a short series of classes for adults with IDD regarding mental health and awareness, Check-in with Friends, a virtual social time for self-advocates within our service region, and online Zumba.

More recently Anthony has acquired a Chromebook to further increase his online access, via Inclusive Technology Access provided by The AWC. It has been exciting to observe Anthony further grow in his participation with board meeting, Check-in with Friends and start a new online virtual day program with his peers. Additionally, through the use of his device, Anthony is once again giving back to his community. With the Chromebook, Anthony has completed two presentations to the self-advocate group Check-in with Friends, educating his friends about tornadoes and severe weather in Colorado.

A fun fact about Anthony is he dreams of becoming a professional weather reporter. Even prior obtaining the Chromebook, Anthony would record himself producing his own local weather reports. He is very skilled in researching local weather and describing what community members can expect with each weather system. In fact, Anthony previously submitted his application to be a local CBS 4 Weather Watcher. Although the opportunity was not provided to Anthony, he is committed to continuing to pursue his dream. With tech coaching supports, The AWC hopes one day soon Anthony will become a local social media weather forecaster. Perhaps with a more extensive resume his dream will become his reality.

As a self-proclaimed social butterfly, the pandemic and the subsequent changes to community engagement has been really hard for Anthony, yet through opportunities such as Inclusive Technology Access with The AWC, things are getting better. “This [Inclusive Technology Access] opens up lots of opportunities for me. I can participate and communicate in things like Project Illumination and Check-in with Friends.”