

Technology deployed to keep seniors in touch with outside world

St. Ann's Community, others say their efforts keep depression at bay

By GINO FANELLI

A top priority for those who run senior living communities is to find ways to keep residents connected with the outside world.

The advent of smartphones and internet connectivity is both an opportunity and a burden for the facilities. Digital communities, new methods of communication, computer gaming and an array of other options can open up entire new worlds for residents. But the learning curve for seniors can be steep, and facility managers strive to find the best ways of integrating tech into their residents' daily lives. St. Ann's Community has developed a way of doing just that through a joint grant program with Bishop Kearney High School.

The grant allowed the "purchase of iPads for Bishop Kearney and for us," said Triciajean Jones, director of life enrichment at St. Ann's Community. Students from the school "come over on a monthly basis and teach everything from internet safety and shopping online to Facebook—anything you can do on an iPad," including texting the grandchildren.

St. Ann's has been partnering with Bishop Kearney for about a year and hosting a similar program with the Urban League of Rochester since last fall. The program has been widely embraced by residents, Jones said, as a way to stay connected with family and friends.

"One of the things we work together to do is confront that isolation," Jones said. "Part of it is fighting the three plagues of a nursing home: loneliness, helplessness and boredom. These technology grants help fight those plagues" by making people feel more engaged. The program "helps the elders and the kids grow and have empathy toward one another," she said.

Getting residents acquainted with the wide world of the internet is paramount in the fight against depression in nursing homes and senior living facilities, managers say. According to a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control, 49 percent of nursing home residents had a depression diagnosis.

Many of the residents at St. Ann's have had little connection with technology, Jones said, which means everything on the internet is fresh and new to them. Some just like a game of solitaire, some video-chat with grandkids

who may live in other states, while others develop more quirky interests. For example, "they love Google Earth, because they can look up either where their family came from in Italy or they look up their childhood address," Jones said.

"We have smart TVs so the tablets plug right in," she said. People might say, "'ooh, let's go to China today,' and then they'll look up China. It's neat how we can see the world differently from 1500 Portland Ave."

Similar programs are offered at St. Ann's independent living facilities, Cherry Ridge and Chapel Oaks. Members of the community-at-large are brought in on a regular basis to teach tech to seniors.

The program is designed for elderly people who might not be as familiar with this type of technology as the average population, said Amanda Hagen, marketing promotions specialist at St. Ann's. "Last summer at Chapel Oaks we did shopping online, internet safety and email."

Hagen said the program is open to the outside community. "We get a lot of adult children who want to teach their moms and dads how to use these kinds of things."

Families of residents at senior living facilities are the other side of the technological window that homes need to address, and technology can play a critical role their as well. At Jewish Senior Life, an in-house developed app, dubbed JSL Connect, is a simple mobile phone interface that more closely links residents and their families.

With the resident's permission, a family member can download the app and gain access to a live log of what the resident is doing, including activities the resident is attending, some medical information and other pertinent facts.

JSL Connect was launched in November and so far 200 have signed up.

"Say your mother goes into a nursing home—you're concerned," said Travis Masonis, chief information officer at Jewish Senior Life. "It's a huge change (and you're wondering) what is she doing all day? Is she sitting in her room? Are people taking care of her? Is she taking part in events? What the app lets you see ... are events your loved one did attend."

As Masonis explained, JSL Connect helps combat depression. Family members can see whether the resident is not going to activities and can intervene as necessary.



Depositphotos stock image

"We want to make this information available to family members, so hopefully they can sleep better at night knowing that their loved one is actively involved in the new community they're living in," Masonis said.

When building the app, Jewish Senior Life took care to integrate a number of novel features to make it as intuitive as possible, including QR codes placed at points of interest around campus and, soon, a means to share photos between family members and residents. It's all an effort to spur conversation during an often difficult transition.

"Maybe they see that their loved one isn't taking part in events, and they want to see what events are available (and) encourage them," Masonis said.

At both St. Ann's and Jewish Senior Life, the move to better integrate technology serves to ensure that the world outside doesn't escape their residents.

"For folks who have never had that urge (to use technology), it doesn't come easy," Jones said. "But when most of our residents are given the chance to work on a skill they have or grow in a different way, they take advantage of that." gfanelli@bridgetowermedia.com/(585) 653-4022