

Seniors learn, embrace technology to keep in touch during pandemic

By **ANDREA DECKERT**

Senior living communities have upped their efforts in helping residents navigate the increasingly digital landscape, noting the technology support can improve the mental and physical health of the elderly.



Masonis

One local example is Jewish Senior Life who has partnered with Rochester Institute of Technology's Saunders College of Business to explore how new technologies may impact and improve the lives of seniors, including supporting research stipends and resources for students.

TekHub is participating in the partnership. The program, which started last March, offers technology assistance to residents at Jewish Senior Life's independent living residence, The Summit at Brighton.

"It's a one stop shop for meeting the technology needs of our seniors," says Travis Masonis, Jewish Senior Life's chief information officer and vice president of information technology.

Masonis says TekHub grew out of research on how technology could be used to enhance residents' lives.

While Masonis was not expecting the COVID-19 pandemic that hit when the program was rolled out, the timing ended up being beneficial.

With the increased reliance on technology to communicate, residents were able to reach out to TekHub with questions related to FaceTime and Zoom.

The interaction allowed them to not only use the technology to reach out to family and friends, but to also stay engaged through activities such as on-line games.

The service has been in-demand, Masonis says, adding that TekHub has logged just under 1,000 technology-related encounters with residents since it began.

Noah Wallace, a fourth-year computing security student at RIT who leads TekHub, says residents have asked for support with issues including setting up email accounts and accessing WiFi on their devices.

He has also provided tips on how to keep one's password protected and how to navigate virtual platforms.

Once the seniors are familiar with the technology, they become more comfortable using it and sharing their knowledge with others, he says.

Wallace has offered sessions on cybersecurity via Zoom. He plans to hold similar ses-

sions on additional topics in the future.

The interactions at TekHub are then analyzed to identify common questions, challenges and successes, allowing the parties to develop solutions to address often encountered challenges.

Masonis says a goal of the partnership with RIT is to expand efforts in helping seniors throughout the area with technology use and look at other ways technology can be incorporated into senior communities, from using automated robotics for sanitizing areas to having a robot-led tai chi class.

He believes seniors' hesitancy when it comes to learning new technologies is more about confidence versus competence, noting that generation did not grow up with technology the way younger generations did.

Once they learn the tools, however, they are anxious to use them, he says.

"Seniors are just as able to adopt to technology as college students," Masonis says. "I see great things on the horizon."

Victor Perotti, the Benjamin Forman Professor for Collaborative Research in the Saunders College of Business at RIT, agrees that seniors may get a bad rap when it comes to technology.

He adds that many who reached out to the TekHub for assistance did so not because of sensory or cognitive challenges, but because they were unfamiliar with how the technology worked and needed some guidance.

"Having that support is incredibly important," he says.

His goal is to help seniors have more confidence with technology, so they are better able to help each other.

The topic is not only of interest to Perotti and the Saunders College at RIT. It has also generated interest from other fields of study at the school, including the Kate Gleason College of Engineering.

To further the effort, RIT, Jewish Senior Life and a few senior living facilities in the region have applied for a National Science Foundation grant.

Further areas of study could include incorporating applied analytics work, machine-learning capabilities and robotics into senior life.

"This is an opportunity to provide innovation in senior care," Perotti says.

Stacie Major, regional director of operations for DePaul Adult Care Communities, says the organization also recognizes the importance of technology in increasing engagement, minimizing social isolation and providing quality interactions for seniors.



Major

Throughout the pandemic, staff assisted in facilitating video chats between residents and family members using computers, smartphones or tablets, she notes.

DePaul also recently began utilizing technology to assist residents in everything from video calls with loved ones, games requiring memory, strategy and skill and music therapy, as well as virtual travel and cultural enrichment and spirituality connections.

The organization has been able to use a number of types of engagement technology to assist seniors, especially as they deal with challenges due to the pandemic, Major says.

For example, wireless headphones are assisting DePaul residents in hearing and focus during conversations with staff and other residents.

The headphones are also used in viewing programming on television and during window visits and FaceTime calls with family and friends. The technology platform has an extensive programming library with live streamed events and on-demand videos, as well.

Virtual reality headsets are allowing DePaul residents to check off bucket list items and engage with the world in ways they never thought possible, Major notes.

That includes taking hot air balloon rides to destinations such as the Bahamas and the Florida Keys to viewing the Northern Lights, all from the comfort of their homes.

Additional engagement technology used at DePaul offer residents content-driven engagement, cognitive and physical exercise and therapy, education, reminiscing and memory support.

Using a touch screen system, for example, residents are participating in exercise classes, sing-alongs, happy hour trivia and games, including Family Feud, Major notes.

DePaul has been able to invest in engagement technology with a \$150,000 grant it received this year from the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation.

The funding is also being used for training to support staff in helping residents effectively use the new technologies, she says, noting the long-term benefits for seniors.

"Our residents and staff have proven to be resilient, adaptable and welcoming to the addition of technology and we anticipate our residents will continue to reap the benefits of advancements in senior living activities for many years to come," Major says.

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