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One organization's early adoption of technology emerging as the industry's standard of care

The sixth in a series of case studies from the Preparing for the Future Report

- Strategic plans focused on delivering concierge and monitoring services as fee-for-service or bundled package
- Early adoption of point-of-care technology improved the quality of documentation and yielded higher reimbursements
- Tablet devices being explored as “master remote controls” for residents to use in apartment environment
- Strongly committed to embed monitoring technologies into a subset of its assisted living environment and test impacts on resident wellbeing, satisfaction and ability to age in place

The Organization

The story of ACTS Retirement-Life Communities began in the early 1970s when a suburban Philadelphia pastor and members of a nondenominational church sought to offer retired church members a new and better way of living. Their idea was to create a community that offered a fulfilling and meaningful independent living lifestyle but also ensured that a quality skilled health care environment would be available if it was ever needed.

Using their own resources and talents, this group of visionaries built the first part of what today is known as Fort Washington Estates, which opened in Fort Washington, Pa. in 1972. Over more than three decades, ACTS has evolved into the largest not-for-profit owner, operator and developer of continuing care retirement communities (CCRCs) in the United States. ACTS life care communities provide independent living residences for people age 62 and older and offer guaranteed access to assisted living and skilled nursing care services, usually on the same campus.

Currently, ACTS operates 23 not-for-profit life care retirement communities that are home to more than 8,300 seniors in eight states: Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Florida.

Technology-Enabled Model or Service

ACTS has implemented and explored several types of technology-enabled services, including:

Point-of-care documentation: In the early 2000s, ACTS became an early adopter of point-of-care technology developed by Resource Systems, Inc., now part of CERNER. This technology helps nursing assistants and other caregivers track the care they provide to residents in the organization's nursing units.

Electronic health records (EHRs): During the mid-2000s, ACTS expanded its clinical documentation system to include nursing notes, progress notes and incident reporting. These expansions were designed to prepare the organization for its planned EHR implementation. However, the organization's EHR investment plans were put on hold during the recent economic crisis.

Handheld and tablet devices: Currently, ACTS is carefully watching the emergence of handheld and tablet devices that have the potential to place technology in the hands of each one of its 6,000 employees at a relatively low cost. The organization has provided about 30 Apple iPad 2 devices to senior management as part of a tablet pilot project.

Monitoring technology: ACTS has made a strong commitment to embed monitoring technologies into a subset of its assisted living environment and to test the extent to which these sensor-laden solutions contribute to resident wellbeing, satisfaction and ability to age in place.

Infrastructure changes: ACTS is laying the foundation for future technology deployments by building up its technology infrastructure. For example, the organization has worked with Verizon to bring fiber optics connection to eight of its campuses. It has also deployed wireless hotspots in its core public areas, including lobbies and cafes, across all of its campuses. ACTS is developing a plan to expand to campus-wide wireless. In addition to hosting a variety of resident-centered amenities, this wireless infrastructure is expected to increase connectivity across all ACTS campuses in order to support health and wellness programming and help the organization remain competitive.

Implementation Approach

The latest plans for technology deployment at ACTS are designed to support the organization's key strategic initiatives. For example, ACTS decided several years ago to place a new emphasis on offering top-notch hospitality services to its residents while helping those residents to maintain health and wellness and to age in place. Through this effort, which has been branded as the "ACTS Signature Experience," the organization enhanced its wellness programming while expanding its existing home health companion services to ensure that residents living in independent and assisted living will move across the continuum of care more slowly and exercise more choice during that process.

To enhance the ACTS Signature Experience, the organization also made a commitment to utilize state-of-the-art technology as a way to monitor resident wellness and ability to age in place and to integrate up-to-date technologies into each of its living environments. While the economy has slowed progress on these initiatives, the organization is preparing its first test of monitoring technologies in assisted living with the goal of slowing residents' movement to skilled care.

ACTS is also working hard to help its residents use and feel more comfortable with technology. During Resident

Technology Days, residents have the opportunity to explore social networking and try out mobile devices such as handheld and tablet computers. Over the long term, ACTS plans to introduce its residents to a whole range of technologies that they can use to experience next-generation television, video conferencing, remote monitoring and personal emergency response. ACTS is also exploring the possibility of making the iPad a "master remote control" for its communities. Residents could eventually be using that tablet computer to control the apartment environment, communicate with management and make requests for service. The organization's long-range plans call for delivering concierge and monitoring services either on a fee-for-service basis or as part of a bundled package.

Outcomes

Like other organizations, ACTS' point-of-care technologies improved the quality of the organization's documentation and yielded higher reimbursement revenues due to ACTS' ability to better document the care it provided to higher acuity residents. The organization's purchase of point-of-care hardware with touch screens and more human-style interfaces helped improve staff members' comfort with technology.

Business Case

Organizations like ACTS are currently emerging from the survivalist mode that they adopted, by necessity, during the recent economic crisis. ACTS remains confident that residential-based CCRCs emphasizing wellness and hospitality will continue to enjoy a strong market share. Technology that helps ACTS take steps toward new business models, and those that can be scaled rapidly, are expected to play a role in enhancing the organization's market position.

ACTS will not formally measure return on investment (ROI) for every technology deployment. For example, there are some technology investments—including a wireless infrastructure and an EHR—which must be pursued even if there is no short-term ROI. Aging services organizations won't survive in the future without an EHR, wireless connectivity and a core set of programs supporting wellness and hospitality. Instead of basing technology investment decisions on ROI, organizations should conduct a value analysis that helps them determine how fast they can deploy these technologies, the level of risk the organization can absorb, and how well that organization can adjust to change.

Keys to Success

Break down internal silos: ACTS' success in helping residents age in place will depend on its ability to break down the silos that separate its independent living, assisted living and skilled nursing service delivery. The organization is now becoming highly proactive in exploring whether it can redefine its core service model, which currently focuses on delivering services and supports within particular levels of care. ACTS would like to move to a model in which delivery of services and supports is independent of location and uses a home health model across the continuum.

Advice to Others

Build the technology infrastructure. Organizations should invest now in basic technologies that can be adapted to a variety of business models. For example, a comprehensive EHR system is no longer optional for organizations. In addition, wireless connectivity that is available across the campus for use by both staff and residents is a “must have” and can now be achieved for a relatively affordable price. Finally, organizations should begin experimenting with tablet and handheld computers, which promise to become a standard component of future service delivery. ■

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