LeadingAge® CAST
center for *aging services technologies*

Case Study:
Facilitating Connection: The Power of Equipping Seniors with Devices to Broker Social Engagement

2Life COMMUNITIES

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Categories:

- ◆ Reduce Social Isolation and Feelings of Loneliness
- ◆ Increased Resident Engagement and Satisfaction, Social Networks, Quality of Life, and Staff Efficiencies

About the Organization

Organization Name:
2Life Communities

Main Contributor:
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Organization Type:
Nonprofit providing housing with services for older adults.

Organization Description:
2Life Communities, founded in 1965, operates on the belief that all seniors should have the opportunity to live a full life of connection and purpose—a model called aging in community, which directly combats the growing public health crisis of social isolation and loneliness among older adults. Serving a diverse population of over 1,580 older adults, 2Life creates communities with a laser-sharp focus on affordability.

Project Description

In order to keep our seniors connected during COVID-19, 2Life pioneered a Digital Device Lending Library (DDLL). We trained residents on using Samsung Chromebooks and Samsung Tab A's, which we preloaded with internet cellular wireless connectivity and Zoom videoconferencing software. In partnership with Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly (LBFE), a Boston-based nonprofit that serves seniors, 2Life staff have been offering coursework tailored for 2Life seniors over Zoom. Since the start of the program in the fall of 2020, 76.4% of seniors who borrowed a device have reported that the device has enabled them to socialize with family, friends, and others; 73.5% have reported that it has enabled them to socialize with the 2Life community.

Socialization Modality

Samsung Chromebooks and Samsung Tab A's offer numerous opportunities for social engagement including videoconferencing software (Zoom, Skype, WeChat, and Viber), community events calendars, email, access to e-books and audiobooks through the Kindle Cloud Reader app, Libby app, and online libraries, as well as access to Facebook, Instagram, game apps, videos, music, and a plethora of other resources online.

System Embodiment

Each resident who participates in the DDLL program borrows a Samsung Chromebook or a Samsung Tab A. The Chromebooks are touch-screen devices that can be used in tablet mode and also come with a stylus.

Business Model

The DDLL project was funded by grants from the Tufts Health Plan Foundation (now Point32Health), the Association of Jewish Aging Services, Boston Resiliency Fund, the City of Boston, and investments by 2Life Communities. 2Life provided internet-connected Chromebooks and tablets to 2Life seniors for free; these were funded by the grants and by investments from 2Life.

Implementation Approach

During the pandemic, 2Life staff created a DDLL to enable our seniors to participate in 2Life and our partners' programming, forge relationships with their peers and staff, establish intergenerational connections with members of the larger community, and stay in touch with their families and friends. Our secondary goals were to provide our seniors with technical skills that are essential for functioning in an increasingly

The LeadingAge Center for Aging Services Technologies (CAST) is focused on accelerating the development, evaluation and adoption of emerging technologies that will transform the aging experience. As an international coalition of more than 400 technology companies, aging-services organizations, businesses, research universities and government representatives, CAST works under the auspices of LeadingAge, an association of 5,000 nonprofit aging services providers and other mission-minded organizations dedicated to making America a better place to grow old.

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digitized world and to create feelings of empowerment. Our DDLL program has a strong intergenerational and volunteer-based component that benefits our residents by providing opportunities for intergenerational connections and engagement.

The 2Life approach to bridging the digital divide for seniors is premised on fostering a symbiotic relationship between socialization and technology.
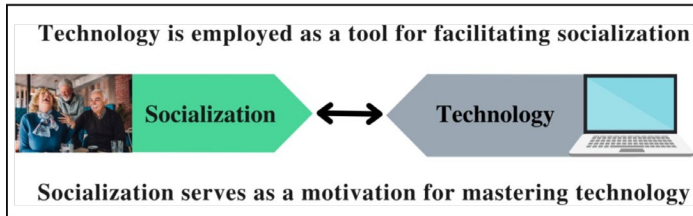
Since the beginning of the pandemic, 2Life staff have employed computing devices preloaded with video-conferencing software in order to drive seniors' social connectedness and engagement. When 2Life seniors were advised to quarantine in their apartments in the fall of 2020, 2Life staff on each campus identified seniors who did not own internet-connected computing devices and were interested in participating in 2Life programming, and provided them with internet-connected Chromebooks and Samsung Tab A's. We developed a system for training seniors who had never used a computer, in addition to those who had used computing devices that were different from the ones that they borrowed. Since then, 2Life staff has been training seniors on using the DDLL devices by offering one-on-one training sessions, classes, and detailed handouts.

2Life staff have designed and taught over Zoom a comprehensive curriculum of courses tailored for 2Life seniors residing across five campuses in partnership with the Boston chapter of Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly (LBFE). Since the beginning of the pandemic, a total of 25 courses have been taught by 2Life staff over Zoom; in each of these courses, special attention has been paid to the social component. We have used ice-breakers, discussion questions, joint activities, games, and break-out rooms in order to engage seniors and create opportunities for socializing. One of the "Learn to Zoom" course participants commented as follows on his experience of having taken the class, "I found it very enjoyable. I enjoyed talking to people from other campuses, and I learned quite a bit about Zoom. The one-on-one attention [tech tutoring] is important to me." Our virtual programming has been supported by volunteers, who serve as virtual course instructors and technology tutors. Intergenerational connections with college students and connections with volunteers have greatly benefited 2Life seniors.

In addition, 2Life campuses have been offering a variety of events and activities to our seniors virtually – they have organized intergenerational reach-out sessions, social hours, game nights, resident birthday parties, holiday concerts, and holiday celebrations, among other events. These events have been hosted on individual 2Life campuses and across the campuses. All of our virtual programming has been designed to provide seniors with rich and varied opportunities for socializing and engagement. Employing Zoom as a tool for facilitating socialization and engagement, we have built a vibrant, joyous, and inclusive virtual community of 2Life older adults.

2Life Device Survey

Survey Question	% of Seniors Who Agree
I am able to receive support with using technology at 2Life when I need it.	96.9%
Borrowing a 2Life device has made a positive difference in terms of my independence and mastery in using technology.	88.2%
Borrowing a 2Life device has made a positive difference in terms of helping me socialize with family, friends, and others.	76.4%
Borrowing a 2Life device has made a positive difference in terms of helping me socialize with the 2Life community.	73.5%
Borrowing a 2Life device has made a positive difference in terms of helping me socialize with the greater community at large.	70.5%

* Percentage includes seniors who agree and strongly agree.

Providing our seniors with social opportunities through technology has helped reduce social isolation and feelings of loneliness, increased resident engagement and satisfaction, and increased seniors' social networks. The DDLL program has improved seniors' overall quality of life.

Moreover, the program has increased staff efficiencies by enabling 2Life staff to offer residents a variety of high-quality virtual programming created by 2Life and its community partners, including LBFE and a local synagogue. 2Life staff have been able to provide agency-wide programming for seniors who reside on five 2Life campuses in Greater Boston without transporting them to these events.

Challenges and Pitfalls to Avoid

Our main challenge has been training seniors over the phone rather than in person during the lockdown. 2Life staff and volunteers spent countless hours on one-on-one phone calls and provided seniors with extremely detailed handouts on how to use the device that they borrowed in their native languages. We successfully trained many seniors on using computers over the phone; at the same time, these phone calls also provided seniors with much needed human connections during the lockdown.

To ensure that seniors benefit the most from borrowing computing devices, these devices need to be configured to be used in the personalized mode rather than in the guest mode because the former renders computers significantly more user-friendly. Configuring Chromebooks in the personalized mode enabled 2Life staff to adjust accessibility settings and language settings for each senior who borrowed a device. However, training seniors with visual impairment how to use the DDLL devices has been a challenge; while we have been using a magnifier app, Chromebooks and Samsung Tab A's are not well-suited for the visually impaired population.

Lessons Learned/ Advice to Share with Others

1. Technology can be employed as a tool for facilitating social connectedness and engagement in a variety of ways; most importantly, this can be accomplished by training seniors to use video-conferencing software.

2. We have learned that seniors greatly benefit from intergenerational virtual connections; during Zoom courses offered to 2Life seniors by the LBFE cohort of Northeastern Co-op students and college volunteers, seniors and instructors shared their life experiences, views on current events, and aspirations. 2Life seniors have enjoyed these social interactions and shared their insights and wisdom with the younger generations. These interactions have been inspiring for seniors and students alike, bridging the generational divide. In the post-pandemic world, virtual programming will be ideal for connecting seniors to programming when meeting in person is not an option. Seniors also greatly benefit from being able to connect virtually with loved ones whom they cannot see in person.

3. Last, but perhaps the most important takeaway, is that the experience of offering virtual programming for two years has taught us that virtual community building works best when it is conducted simultaneously at the micro and macro levels. At the micro level, it is beneficial to create small social circles of seniors who share similar cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds and interests; at the macro-level, the goal is to engage, connect, and unite the entire community of older adults that an agency serves. When conducted properly, the micro and macro level community building processes are not in competition but rather reinforce one another. At 2Life, we have a number of disparate enclaves; 69% of 2Life seniors hail from Russia and China and have varying degrees of English proficiency. We have been offering virtual programming for Russian and Mandarin speakers in their native languages. Russian-speaking seniors who were enrolled in the "Russian Zoom Academy" course benefited from socializing with fellow expatriates who reside across five campuses. This has been community building at the micro level par excellence. Seniors who feel hesitant about mastering new technology are more likely to take the plunge if they join a small group of their peers who come from a similar background or have similar interests. Having mastered rudimentary technical skills in a smaller group, a number of multilingual 2Life seniors have been joining agency-wide virtual events. Thus community-building at the micro level promotes engagement at the macro level.

4. Conversely, community-building at the macro level inspires engagement at the micro level. To exemplify this trend, a 2Life senior who attended Zoom classes that were offered across 2Life campuses became highly proficient in Zoom and started hosting virtual game nights for a small group of residents on her own campus; the experience of being part of a larger community inspired this senior to create a small game night community. To conclude, nonprofits that serve seniors are well advised to build on the symbiotic relationship between community-building at the micro and macro levels.