

Case Study: Connecting Homebound Older Adults Through Technology



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Categories:

- ◆ Reduce social isolation and feelings of loneliness
- ◆ Increase social networks
- ◆ Increase quality of life

About the Organization

Organization Name:

Selfhelp Community Services, Inc.

Main Contributor:

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Director of Innovation/VSC

Organization Type:

Housing with Services
Home Health/Home Care
Adult Day Care/Senior Centers
Home and Community-based Services

Organization Description:

Selfhelp Community Services provides comprehensive services to help older adults live life independently and with dignity in their own homes. For 85 years, Selfhelp has been committed to serving thousands of New York's most vulnerable, including operating the oldest and largest program serving Holocaust survivors in North America. Today, Selfhelp serves more than 20,000 older adults through a range of home care, affordable housing, and social services.

Project Description

The Virtual Senior Center (VSC) provides online, face-to-face interaction and education for older adults who are homebound due to frailty or circumstances. Launched 10 years ago, long before Zoom became prevalent, the service uses a straightforward virtual interface to connect older adults to each other and to the outside world. The VSC offers interactive classes, cultural experiences, exercise courses, and discussion groups. During COVID-19, this service has grown exponentially.

Socialization Modality

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| ◆ Video chat | ◆ E-reader |
| ◆ Audio chat | ◆ Art |
| ◆ Photo sharing | ◆ Games |
| ◆ Email | ◆ Exercise |
| ◆ Life Stories | ◆ Music |
| ◆ Event/Activity sharing | ◆ Companion app |
| ◆ Activity Calendar | ◆ Participant-to-Participant Video Chat |

System Embodiment

- | | |
|---------------|--------------------|
| ◆ Tablet | ◆ Desktop computer |
| ◆ Smart phone | ◆ Laptop computer |

Business Model

- ◆ Private pay
- ◆ Medicare Advantage Program (pending)
- ◆ Managed Care (pending)

Implementation Approach

The VSC is open to individuals and to groups. Community-based organizations, healthcare providers, residential living associations, or any other group can develop their own virtual community on the VSC platform. Groups can share in Selfhelp's calendar of classes, or develop private classes just for their members. Whether joining on an individual basis or as part of a group, all members use their personal devices to log into the VSC whenever they choose, review the calendar of classes, and join whatever

interests them. Classes take place daily, year-round online, and are available in English, Mandarin, Chinese, Russian, Spanish, and Korean. In each class, all participants can see, hear, and speak to each other and the facilitator in real time.

Outcomes

Independent evaluation by Dr. Barrie Raik and Dr. Veerawat Phongtankuel — researchers from the Division of Geriatrics at Weill Cornell Medicine — found that Selfhelp's VSC:

- ◆ Reduced loneliness by 80%.
- ◆ Increase connectedness by 60%.
- ◆ Increase self-reported health status (well-being) by 51%.
- ◆ 97% of participants said the VSC improved the quality of their life.
- ◆ Participants have reported they appreciate how attending live, online classes reduces their social isolation and loneliness and increases their social network.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations have moved to virtual offerings. While the Zoom platform is a simple way to provide virtual classes, the VSC platform offers substantial additional benefits, including:

- ◆ Extensive content. VSC classes are available round-the-clock, seven days a week.
- ◆ Senior-friendly interface. Classes are easy to identify, join, and view for people at all levels of technological sophistication.
- ◆ Community connection. Participants develop strong social relationships by seeing the same people at regular times.
- ◆ Class management. Providers appreciate the easy scheduling of class facilitators and reports on class ratings and participation.
- ◆ Security. All classes take place within a secure environment which is not accessible to those without a VSC subscription.

Challenges and Pitfalls to Avoid

Challenges include overcoming technophobia and getting users to try and use the technology. The simplicity of the user-interface design is paramount.

Another potential challenge is content quality, varieties, delivery style, and the level of interactions and engagement opportunities it offers.

Lessons Learned/Advice to Share with Others

As described in the outcomes section, independent evaluation has found that joining the VSC has multiple emotional and physical health benefits for members, including:

- ◆ Reduced isolation and loneliness.
- ◆ Increased feelings of connectedness and self-reported health status.
- ◆ Improved overall quality of life.

Please see <http://vscm.selfhelp.net/service> for more information.

To achieve these outcomes, you need to choose the right platform that is easy to use by the population you serve and that offers plenty of interaction and engagement modalities between the users and instructors, as well as among the users themselves.

Moreover, make sure that the platform offers, or allows you to offer or partner with third parties that offer, fresh content. This includes classes, tours, etc., that cater to a broad array of interests among your audience. It is equally important that such content allows for significant interactions between the instructors and participants and among participants themselves, so that users return and maintain a high utilization rate.