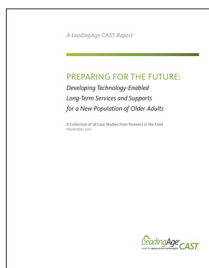**Selfhelp**
Community Services, Inc.

Contributors:

Stuart C. Kaplan
CEO

Leo M. Asen
Vice President, Senior Communities

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LeadingAge™ CAST
center for aging services technologies

For more information contact:

Zohra Sirat, Programs and
Operations Administrator, CAST
zsirat@LeadingAge.org
(202) 508-9438
LeadingAge.org/CAST

A thoughtful approach to increasing clients' comfort with technology to improve access to, and quality of care

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

- Employs social workers to demystify technology to home care clients with chronic conditions
- Partnered with Microsoft to install Internet service, video camera, microphone and computer with easy-to-use touch-screen monitor in the homes of homebound seniors through the Virtual Senior Center project
- Working towards a membership model where Virtual Senior Center participants would pay a monthly fee for use of the connectivity tools

The Organization

In 1936, a group of German émigrés joined forces to help European Jewish refugees fleeing from Nazi persecution establish themselves in America. The founders of Selfhelp Community Services believed that with basic support, new arrivals would be able to use their skills, experiences and strengths to build independent, dignified and productive lives. These themes of independence and empowerment have been a hallmark of Selfhelp for the past 75 years.

Today, Selfhelp remains dedicated to serving Holocaust survivors and has expanded its community to enable the elderly and other at-risk populations to live in their own homes, independently and with dignity. Selfhelp manages six housing complexes serving more than 1,000 low and moderate-income seniors; and five senior centers that provide programs to enrich the lives of over 6,000 older New Yorkers. It offers residents of four Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities extensive on-site care services. The organization also manages a Medicaid-supported Licensed Home Care Services Agency and a Medicare-Certified Home Health Agency. Selfhelp provides geriatric case management services through its Senior Source initiative.

Technology-Enabled Model or Service

In 2005, the Selfhelp board of trustees began thinking seriously about how to position its organization for the future. One result of that discussion was a board decision to include technology in Selfhelp's mission statement, which pledges that the organization "lead in applying new methods and technologies to address changing needs of its community." In implementing this mission, Selfhelp has created a corporate culture that incorporates technology into each of the organization's initiatives and planning activities. Recent technology initiatives include remote monitoring, cognitive exercise, telehealth both in home and in congregate facilities, computer learning and a virtual senior center.

Implementation Approach

Monitoring technology: Selfhelp's remote monitoring program has served more than 100 seniors since it began in 2005. At any given time, the organization has remote sensor monitoring systems deployed in the homes of 30 home care clients who have chronic conditions, a history of falling or difficulty managing medications. A client typically learns about the monitoring systems from Selfhelp social workers who are trained to explain the technology and how it can benefit clients.

Telehealth: Telehealth devices equipped with electronic blood pressure cuffs, glucose meters, medication reminders and weight scales help Selfhelp keep track of clients' health status on a daily basis. Collected data is transmitted by telephone lines to registered nurses at Selfhelp who review it daily and alert home health clinicians when an intervention is necessary. Clients typically begin using the telehealth service after an assessment by nurses in Selfhelp's home health agency. Selfhelp has recently installed two telehealth kiosk devices within two residential properties and is planning a third implementation within a senior center.

Computer learning centers: Each Selfhelp senior center features a computer learning center where older people can use technology to socialize with peers, communicate with family members or develop new skills that can help them find volunteer work or post-retirement employment. In addition, senior center clients can use the Nintendo Wii gaming system for exercise and socialization. The Dakim BrainFitness system is also available to senior center clients and participants in Selfhelp's Alzheimer's Resource Program.

Virtual Senior Center: In March 2010, Selfhelp entered into a partnership with the Microsoft Corporation, the New York City Department for the Aging and the city's Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications to develop a [Virtual Senior Center](#) that links homebound seniors to Selfhelp's Benjamin Rosenthal Senior Center in Flushing, Queens.

With the help of Microsoft, the home of each Virtual Senior Center participant was equipped with a desktop computer, a touch-screen monitor, a small video camera, a microphone and broadband Internet service. In addition, video cameras and monitors were strategically placed around the senior center. Using a technology platform developed by It's Never 2 Late, homebound seniors can now interact with classmates and instructors at the center and take part in activities such as armchair yoga, painting classes, current events discussions, museum tours and tai chi.

Virtual Senior Center Outcomes

Enhanced interaction: In addition to helping its participants engage in senior center activities, the Selfhelp Virtual Senior Center program has increased the contact between participants and their Selfhelp case workers. Prior to the program's launch, clients received a face-to-face visit from their case workers twice each year. Now, thanks to web cameras, clients and case workers talk much more often. In addition, Selfhelp is beginning to see a reduction in the amount of money it spends to send case workers to clients' homes. Using a grant from the UJA Federation of New York, the organization is currently evaluating the effectiveness of conducting case management electronically.

Challenges

Overcoming technophobia: Fear of technology, particularly among staff members, has affected every technology-enabled service implemented by Selfhelp. The organization has put significant energy into overcoming this technophobia through staff education because it believes that clients will be more likely to accept technology if staff members accept it.

Business Case

Selfhelp uses private donations and grant funds to support its implementation of innovative projects and services that aren't covered by government reimbursement. For example, technology has been included in the organization's fundraising agenda since the Selfhelp board incorporated technology into the organization's mission. In addition, grant funds have helped Selfhelp mitigate its financial risk when developing and testing new technology-enabled services like the Virtual Senior Center, which was supported by the Microsoft Corporation.

Looking to the future, Selfhelp is developing a business plan for scaling the Virtual Senior Center initiative so it can reach more homebound older people. Initially, the organization will seek additional grant funds to support the program. Over the long-term, Selfhelp envisions a membership model through which Virtual Senior Center participants would pay a monthly fee in return for use of a personal computer, web camera and appropriate software that could connect them to their local Selfhelp senior center. The organization is also exploring additional revenue-generating opportunities, which might be brokered through technology vendors once the Virtual Senior Center connectivity tools are installed in clients' homes.

Selfhelp uses a sliding scale fee system to provide telehealth and remote monitoring devices to its client. This business model has been challenging to implement because elders who receive services from Selfhelp generally have modest incomes and often hesitate before spending money on a monitoring unit. Despite this challenge, however, Selfhelp remains committed to providing technology-enabled services. It believes that implementation of the Affordable Care Act will spur more widespread recognition that remote monitoring and telehealth are important tools that can help community partners improve the quality of health care while reducing costs.

Advice to Others

Focus on your broad objectives. It's easy for organizations to get frustrated when launching a technology-enabled service and it's tempting for managers and staff to blame the technology for this frustration. Focusing on the organization's broad objectives—and viewing technology as a tool to reach those objectives—will help the organization work through the frustration.

Recruit technology champions. Once Selfhelp incorporated technology into its mission statement, it began to actively recruit new board members who had technology backgrounds. With these new members on board, the organization established a technology committee that is led by a technology champion. The organization has also worked hard to identify staff members who are supportive of and familiar with technology. It calls on these staff members to convince others to give technology a try.

Take time to understand the needs of the client, rather than imposing your preferences. Selfhelp learned this lesson a few years back when, without consulting with clients, it started offering a pharmacy-based service that provided home delivery of medications and personal care products ordered over the Internet. Senior staff thought the program was a great idea, but few Selfhelp clients used the service because they actually liked walking to the pharmacy and viewed it as a way to get out of the house, exercise and socialize with their pharmacist.

Build technology into your physical infrastructure. Selfhelp is currently building a 92-unit "smart" housing community that will support a host of technology-enabled services, including high-speed internet, remote monitoring and communications technologies.

Don't turn your back on low-tech assistive devices. Understand that not everyone needs a high-tech device. Sometimes clients just need a grab bar, a magnifying glass or a telephone sound amplifier to maintain their independence and quality of life.

Continue hi-touch care. Importantly, don't use technology to minimize or negate good, old-fashioned social work and personal contact with clients. ■

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