

Case Study: Bridging the Digital Divide for Seniors at 2Life



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CATEGORIES

- ◆ Technical Support
- ◆ Education and Training
- ◆ Programming
- ◆ Connectivity
- ◆ Infrastructure

Project Description

During COVID-19 and in the aftermath of the pandemic, we transformed the Resident Technology Support Program from the computer center model that focused on assisting seniors with computer equipment to one that holistically addresses 2Life-resident older adults' technical needs. Residents have greatly benefited from this transition, and the program membership has more than doubled. Currently, the Technology Support Program serves over 900 residents. Our approach to bridging the digital divide for older adults encompasses internet connectivity, access to computing devices, technical support and education, and personal device troubleshooting services.

Business Model

The 2Life Resident Technology Support Program is operated through a Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Neighborhood Initiative Grant and through investments by 2Life Communities, and is offered free of charge to residents. Partnering with the information technology (IT) department, we procure and lend internet-connected Chromebooks and tablets as well as sound amplifiers to 2Life seniors and train them on using the devices as part of the Digital Device Lending Library (DDLL) Program. During the pandemic, the DDLL Program was funded by grants from the Point32Health Foundation, the Association of Jewish Aging Services, Boston Resiliency Fund, the City of Boston, and 2Life Communities. The highly successful DDLL Program continues to be funded by investments by 2Life. 2Life has a fully fledged IT department that built a Wi-Fi network specifically for the DDLL devices residents use in their apartments and the common areas. The IT department also created the infrastructure for in-house Wi-Fi networks that residents use free of charge in the common areas. Moreover, 2Life residents benefit from using five computer centers across 2Life campuses, which are equipped with desktop computers, printers and scanners. 2Life Communities funds the computer centers' infrastructure, which is supported by Tech Networks of Boston.

About the Organization

Organization Name:

2Life Communities

Main Contributor:

Anna Verbuk, Director of the Resident Technology Program

Organization Type:

A nonprofit organization that provides housing with services for older adults.

Organization Description:

2Life Communities, a nonprofit organization 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 1,880 older adults, 2Life creates communities with a laser-sharp focus on affordability.

Implementation Approach

At 2Life, we have developed and employed a multipronged holistic approach to achieving digital equity for a low income, socially disadvantaged, and multilingual senior population, which can be replicated with and adapted to other senior populations.

In addition to providing internet connectivity, computing devices, and technical training, we focus on providing older adults with a reason to invest themselves in mastering technology. The 2Life approach to bridging the digital divide is premised on fostering a symbiotic relationship between socialization and technology. On the one hand, technology is employed as a tool for facilitating socialization; on the other hand, socialization serves as a motivation for mastering technology. In addition to socialization, older adults are motivated to master technology in order to accomplish various tasks online, such as submitting online applications, navigating websites that contain information about benefits for seniors, and accessing information and entertainment resources. In order to educate older adults about technology, the Resident Technology team designed a comprehensive curriculum of more than 30 resident-centric technology courses offered to 2Life older adults in four languages. The coursework falls into three major categories, listed in Table 1.

Hardware, software, and connectivity	Instrumental activities of daily living and hobbies	Communication
Using internet-connected computing devices and smartphones, etc.	Accomplishing various tasks, e.g., submitting applications online and navigating medical portals	Using video-conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom, Skype, etc.)
Using programs and applications	Performing conventional and artificial intelligence (AI)-facilitated internet searches	Using email
Accessing the internet	Accessing entertainment resources online	Using translation tools
Connecting devices to one another	Creating, managing, storing, accessing, and disseminating digital data	Using social networks (e.g., Facebook) and social applications (WhatsApp, WeChat, AI chatbots, etc.)

Table 1

With the advent of AI, we have designed and taught an innovative series of courses on how to use AI tools. Older adults benefit from using AI tools because they provide opportunities for social engagement and connection, and the process of mastering these tools, and even mere exposure to AI technology, provides seniors intellectual stimulation. Moreover, AI-based tutors enable seniors to master new skills in non-technical areas, such as language skills. Our series teaches older adults how to use AI technology to interact with conversational AI chatbots including ChatGPT, how to perform AI-powered internet searches through natural dialogue, how to overcome the language barrier by using ChatGPT as a language tutor, how to play social games that involve live participants and an AI bot, and how to create artwork by using text-to-image prompts.

While we strive to provide as much group instruction as possible in order to use our staff resources in the most efficacious manner, many residents who are older, have limited technical skills, experience cognitive challenges, or face a language barrier require one-on-one instruction and technical support. We also work with all residents one-on-one when addressing unique technical support requests. When instructing older adults one-on-one, the technology team trains them on performing various tasks online, guides them in mastering their devices (both personal and 2Life’s), troubleshoots their personal devices, and helps residents sign up for discounted internet service.

When working with 2Life older adults, our overarching goal is to provide technical instruction in an equitable manner. While most instruction and technical training takes place in computer centers, we assist residents who experience mobility issues and residents who own stationary technical devices in their apartments. Given that 67% of 2Life seniors are native speakers of languages other than English, we hired technical staff who speak the major languages spoken by 2Life residents—Russian, Mandarin, and Cantonese—in addition to English, which enables staff to offer coursework and technical support in residents’ native languages. In addition, we train multilingual residents on using language translation software, change the language of technical devices to their native language, and train them on using the translation capabilities of AI tools. Moreover, we focus on identifying technology solutions for seniors living with cognitive and physical disabilities and educate them on the use of accessibility settings in consultation with the Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired regarding assisting visually impaired seniors.

In order to serve all of our residents’ needs in an equitable manner while using our resources as effectively as possible, 2Life technical staff employ an array of technology education and training modalities, illustrated in Table 2.

Technology Education and Training Modalities Employed at 2Life	
1.	Technical courses offered in person
2.	One-on-one training sessions
3.	Detailed technical handouts
4.	Technical courses taught over Zoom across 2Life campuses
5.	Phone conversations between technical support staff and residents
6.	Email exchanges between technical support staff and residents

Table 2

Partnerships and Technology Volunteers

Partnerships with local organizations that serve seniors, and the engagement of unaffiliated technical volunteers, are integral components of the technology program. We have a longstanding partnership with the Boston Chapter of Little Brothers–Friends of the Elderly (LBFE). Tech-savvy LBFE student volunteers offer weekly “tech café” classes to 2Life residents, providing one-on-one technical support and socializing with 2Life older adults. Tech cafés were offered virtually during the pandemic and have been offered in person since 2021. Intergenerational connections with college students recruited by LBFE have greatly benefited 2Life seniors. In addition, the technology program is supported by nine volunteers recruited by the volunteer program manager and co-supervised by the director of the Resident Technology Program and the volunteer program manager. Partnering with local nonprofits and engaging unaffiliated technology volunteers are crucial strategies for supporting the technology program’s growth. As 2Life expands to new communities, the technology team will continue to rely on partnerships with outside organizations and volunteers in order to serve residents in every 2Life community in an equitable manner.

Program Data, Evaluation, and Outcomes

In order to track resident use of the program and improve our program offerings, we record all instruction and technical support activities for each resident in Salesforce, a customer relationship management database. To date, since March 2021 we have recorded 9,122 resident technology encounters, which includes both events when a resident attended a class and one-on-one technical support sessions. Of these, 1,910 were teaching encounters, which reflect the number of times residents attended technical courses.

In order to evaluate the impact of the technology program and improve it, we have conducted multiple surveys with over 150 program members in partnership with the director of evaluation. To summarize some highlights, we found that:

- 97% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that they are able to receive support with using technology at 2Life;
- 88% agree or strongly agree that borrowing a device library device has made a positive difference in terms of their independence and mastery in using technology;
- 100% agree or strongly agree that they would recommend the technology class that they have taken to other 2Life residents.

Challenges and Pitfalls to Avoid

We transitioned from the computer center model, where we trained residents to use 2Life equipment, to a holistic model that focuses on educating residents about technology and supporting them in using it. In order to safeguard the agency from potential liability issues associated with handling personal devices, we instituted a program enrollment form stating that 2Life residents will hold 2Life harmless of any damages, which residents are required to sign.

Lessons Learned/Advice to Share with Others

The major strategies for expanding resident technology programs cost-effectively include:

- Providing older adults with a motivation for mastering technology
- Using existing institutional resources in the most efficacious manner:
 - Offering group and virtual instruction
 - Using a flexible combination of open access hours and appointments for providing technical support that enables instructors to serve the most residents
 - Using technical handouts
- Building partnerships with outside organizations that provide free technical support and instruction for older adults
- Engaging unaffiliated technical volunteers
- Creating a community of resident technology learners who support one another in their technical education as well as socially.