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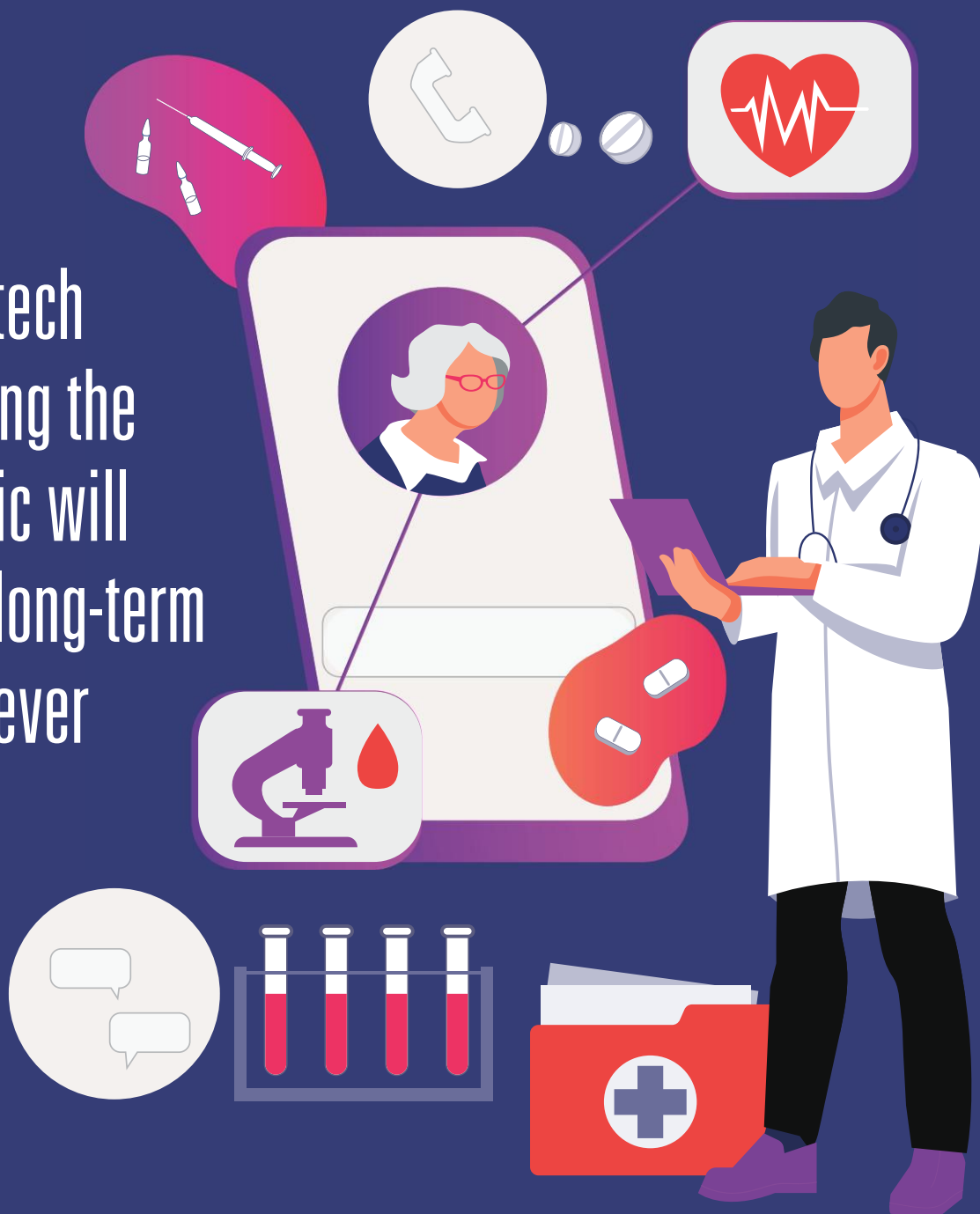
3 ways tech use during the pandemic will change long-term care forever
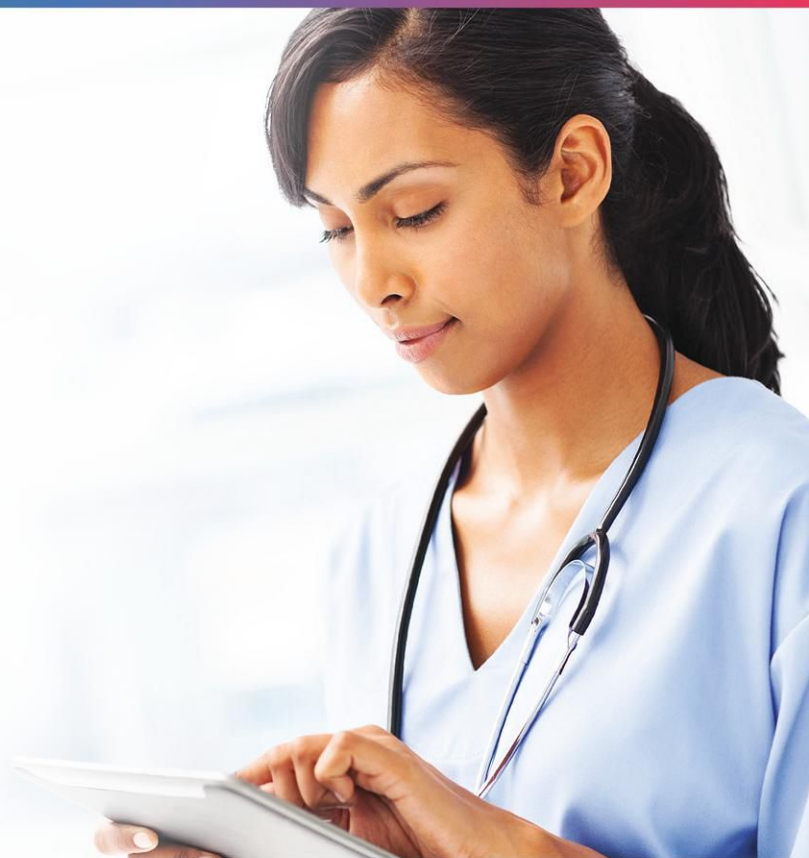page 3

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TRENDS

3 ways tech use during pandemic will change long-term care forever

By Lois A. Bowers

With major vaccination programs completed and visitation restrictions easing, life at long-term care facilities across the country is inching toward looking more like its pre-pandemic self. But even when COVID-19 is not a daily threat anymore, its effects will linger — in a positive way — through the use of technology that will change the industry forever.

Those changes roughly fall into three categories — telemedicine/telehealth, social connectedness and engagement, and infection control — according to Majd Alwan, Ph.D., senior vice president of technology and business strategy for LeadingAge and executive director of the LeadingAge

Center for Aging Services Technologies.

1. Telehealth

Telemedicine, "the traditional computer on wheels or telemed-

icine cart that has sophisticated equipment," and telehealth, "simpler modalities for two-way virtual visits," Alwan said, have provided important access to healthcare for residents who

Photo: Yoshiyoshi Hirokawa/DigitalVision/Getty Images Plus

were confined to their senior living communities or nursing homes or who wished to minimize their risk of being exposed to or exposing others to the coronavirus.

"I firmly believe that telehealth is here to stay," he said. "The end users, whether it's older adults or clinicians who were not familiar with and uncomfortable with telehealth, have had to use it and have been baptized by fire, so to speak, during the pandemic and have become a lot more comfortable with it."

Assisted living, nursing home and perhaps even independent living residents will demand telehealth going forward, Alwan said. "They may find a lot of time efficiency and conve-

COVID-19 ALTERS TECHNOLOGY INVESTMENT

The most significant area of growth in technology investment for senior living and care organizations in 2020 was for video conferencing capabilities, according to Ziegler. Seventy-five percent of respondents to the specialty investment bank's CFO Hotline poll in December said their companies had spent money for such purposes over the past 12 months.

"That's not a surprise," Lisa McCracken, Ziegler's director of senior living research, told attendees of a session at the 2021 Ziegler LeadingAge National Virtual Senior Living CFO Workshop in April. "When you can't do the face-to-face, you're dependent on [video conferencing]."

Video-conferencing wasn't even in the top five in Ziegler's 2018 survey.

Information and communications technology infrastructure was the second-highest area of technology spending in 2020 for senior living and care organizations, with 71% of survey respondents reporting such investments.

"We're laying a lot of wires for Wi-Fi," McCracken said of providers. "You really need a lot of infrastructure. These solutions are great, but if you don't have the infrastructure to support it, you're going to struggle."

Resident/client access to the internet and social networking sites was the No. 3 area for technology investment, with 57% of respondents reporting such expenditures. "That's clearly in line with where we needed to be from a solution standpoint

for residents in the past year," McCracken said.

Fourth on the list was infection control systems, such as air purification systems, disinfection and hand hygiene monitoring systems. Forty-five percent of poll participants said they had spent funds for such purposes. "Who thought that would be in the top five pre-pandemic?" McCracken said. It wasn't in 2018.

The actual total percent of organizations' capital budgets devoted to technology investments didn't really change due to the pandemic, however.

"Essentially, what we saw was more of a shifting of where people were putting the dollars," McCracken said. "You still need to be strategic."

TRENDS

nience in seeing their physician, especially for routine or simple things," he said.

Society as a whole has come to value telehealth, too, Alwan added.

"We probably would have had a lot higher infection rates, and a lot higher hospitalization costs and death rates as well, because of people having to either forego receiving healthcare services or expose themselves to potential infection with the COVID virus or others by going into healthcare provider clinics or hospitals, especially if they didn't have to," he said.

The use of telehealth also received a boost due to flexibilities from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Alwan noted.

"For example, they waived the requirement for the platform to be HIPAA-compliant, and a lot of people used general-purpose video conferencing applications, from Viber to WhatsApp all the way to Skype and Zoom, in addition to the clinical version of Zoom, which is compliant," he said.

CMS also expanded the number of places where clinicians could be reimbursed for providing telehealth services. "Now physicians were able to be reimbursed regardless of where the patient was in terms of originating site," Alwan noted.

He also said he has heard that "CMS is seriously considering extending or making some of

the telehealth flexibilities permanent."

Such a change would incentivize clinicians to accept telehealth calls from nursing homes in urban areas, as well as in senior living, Alwan added, "because that's where the patients live, especially if CMS continues with the flexibility around the patient's home."

The majority of telehealth reimbursements related to older adults have been either audio-only or two-way audio–video conferencing virtual visits, he estimated.

Alwan expects HIPAA-compliance requirements to return.

2. Social connectedness and engagement

Interest in social connectedness and engagement technologies has been significant, "from Skype applications for video conferencing … all the way to classes over Zoom for yoga," Alwan said.

The trend started well before COVID but has seen a step increase during the pandemic, he said, predicting that the use of such technologies will not level off when this coronavirus is a fading memory, "because it's based on what the residents want rather than what they need, and it's fun. Everybody gravitates toward those kinds of solutions, and they do not push back against them."

Alwan said he foresees a continued convergence between

> ## "I FIRMLY BELIEVE THAT TELEHEALTH IS HERE TO STAY."
>
> **— Majd Alwan, Ph.D.**

Photo: MoMo Productions/Stone/Getty Images Plus

WI-FI EXPECTED TODAY

Wi-Fi that enables mobility for residents or staff members also is part of infrastructure, Majd Alwan, Ph.D., said.

"If you are a resident and you need the internet to access the community portal to reserve meals or to participate in a class, you need to be able to do it from wherever you are," he said.

On the care and service provision side, Wi-Fi helps enable point-of-care devices carried by caregivers throughout the day, Alwan said. "If they're doing medication passes and documenting medication adherence, they shouldn't be plugging into the wall to do that documentation," he said.

Wi-Fi "is absolutely the foundation for innovation in the communities," Travis Gleinig, corporate director of information technology and chief information officer at Neptune, NJ-based United Methodist Communities, told attendees of a session at the 2021 Ziegler LeadingAge National Virtual Senior Living CFO Workshop.

"You need robust, enterprise-grade Wi-Fi throughout your campuses to be able to

support not just staff and residents but also any kind of new technology that you're looking to implement or pilot," he said. "It's just an expected part of living in a community today."

Mark Mountel, director of technology and procurement and the HIPAA security officer at Life Enriching Communities, Cincinnati, agreed.

"Wireless everywhere; it's key," he said. "We looked at that several years ago, and we had a number of people say we were crazy for putting wireless … throughout all of our buildings, but it has served us very well. …Making that decision was difficult, but when it was presented as an opportunity, it was decided that we can't not invest in it. It just made sense for the future."

For those who don't have such technology in their communities, James Bowersox, vice president of finance and CFO for Life Enriching Communities, advised doing it sooner rather than later. "We've spent a lot more money on the front end than you thought you would, but it's because if you don't do it now, you'll do it later, and it'll be a lot more expensive," he said.

> ## "THE REIMBURSEMENT ASPECT IS ALSO A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR WHEN IT COMES TO SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS."
>
> — Majd Alwan, Ph.D.

Photo: Bloomberg Creative/Bloomberg Creative Photos/Getty Images Plus

IT'S CLEAR: INTERNET IS A UTILITY

social connectedness and telehealth technology, with an increasing number of social connectedness platforms having dual application.

"As with telehealth, I believe it's going to continue to grow, for the similar reasons, without the reimbursement aspect," he said. "But the reimbursement aspect is also a contributing factor when it comes to social connectedness.

"For example, you can use a computer that is enabled with video-conferencing capabilities, especially if it's HIPAA-compliant, to connect with your physician and have a virtual visit, and you also can use it to connect with family members and continue to attend classes and participate in activities remotely."

3. Infection control

Not surprisingly, providers also have shown a significant interest in infection control technologies during the pandemic, Alwan said. The category, he added, includes tech such as that used to help screen residents and staff members for signs of COVID, perform hand hygiene, and disinfect — UV light disinfection and foggers as well as HVAC systems to help control air quality.

Providers also have welcomed

simple solutions to help them manage COVID-19.

"There was a lot of demand and questions regarding automating the pre-registration and the pre-consent forms for vaccination when the vaccine came about," Alwan said.

Among the many resources LeadingAge CAST provided operators, he added, was an article about how tools such as mail merge in Microsoft could be used to auto-populate the consent form as well as the pre-registration form needed for the federal Pharmacy Partnership for Long-Term Care program.

Infection control wasn't as big of a focus in senior living before the pandemic as it was in skilled nursing, but Alwan said he believes that high interest will continue in both settings, although it will "level off."

"We learned that infection control is important, and we need to be ready for the virus du jour," he said.

"Today, it's COVID. God knows next year if there are going to be strains, whether it's COVID or another virus or a mutation of viruses ... that would require more stringent hand hygiene and infection control strategies in general, and screening of residents and staff and visitors and so on and so forth." ∎
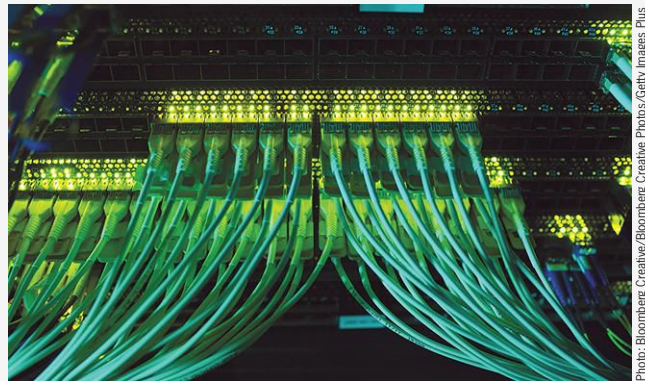
If it wasn't clear beforehand, the pandemic has brought into focus the importance of internet connectivity.

Majd Alwan, Ph.D., senior vice president of technology and business strategy for LeadingAge and executive director of the LeadingAge Center for Aging Services Technologies, said he sees that importance continuing after the pandemic, be it to facilitate telehealth, social connectedness or another purpose. "Even before COVID, we knew that the demand and need for bandwidth among high-end users of the internet grows by 50% year over year," he said.

Since the pandemic began, Alwan added, "We've all seen that increase in demand on video conferencing, which translates into higher demand for more bandwidth on the network infrastructure itself in the community."

That demand comes with a to-do list for operators, he said. "They probably need to up their upload and download speed with their internet service provider, if their network

is capable of handling more bandwidth," Alwan said. "But if that network is not capable of handling more bandwidth, they probably need to update their infrastructure, run fiber optic and bring fiber optic to the building, if not to the unit, frankly."

Broadband availability and access is "absolutely infrastructure," Alwan said, adding, "Can you live without a cell phone today?"

He said he is "excited" about the Biden administration's proposal for improved broadband availability and access, "not only in rural areas, where it has been a challenge even before COVID, but also for lower-income older adults, who could not afford broadband connectivity."

"If there is one thing that this pandemic has shown us it's that internet and connectivity is actually not just an infrastructure; it's a utility," Alwan said. "If it weren't for the internet, the financial impact on a lot of businesses would have been a lot more devastating."

WORKERRECRUITING &RETENTION

Technology helps tackle long-term care's perennial top issue

By Rachael Zimlich, RN, BSN

Healthcare can be both rewarding and draining — especially for frontline workers. High turnover has plagued the long-term care industry for years. The perennial top issue facing providers, the coronavirus pandemic made matters even worse.

"There are many reasons why it is difficult to retain employees in long-term care. The work itself is very demanding, both physically and emotionally," said Peter Corless, executive vice president at human capital management software company OnShift. "Although it can be very rewarding caring for people who are unable to care for themselves, it can also be emotionally challenging to deal with residents who may be in constant pain, are combative and in the process of dying. Also, with a workforce shortage, employees often have to care for more residents than they are typically scheduled for due to other employee absences, etc., and it creates a downward spiral of working short leading to resignations which then just perpetuates the problem."

The median turnover in long-term care — even before the pandemic — was a problem. A major study from the journal *Health Affairs* revealed a 94% median turnover rates among skilled nursing facility nurses in 2017 to 2018. Among all staff, turnover rates averaged around 128% each year, with

Technology may be able to offer a leg up to providers looking to attract new workers and keep existing ones.

Photo: Dimitri Otis/Stone/Getty Images Plus

some facilities reaching turnover rates of more than 300%, according to the report.

All of this, of course, was before the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I don't think there's ever been a recruiting environment like this one," said Tommy Comer, chief human resource officer at Virginia-based Commonwealth Senior Living. It's time for change, he said.

"The industry has to adapt. We've been too rigid with scheduling, with defining part-time and PRN work," Comer added. "We're trying to scrutinize as many things as we can now, from how we hire and how we onboard to how we're paying benefits."

Although providers across the country may be struggling to make the work more appealing to existing staff members facing burnout, or employees from other industries looking for a new start, technology may be able to offer a leg up. It it isn't a be-all, end-all, Comer said, adding, however, "I think technology can help us quickly gather feedback."

Adaptive learning can help
Commonwealth, with 34 communities and more than 2,000 employees, began piloting Arena Analytics, an adaptive learning platform for recruiting and retention efforts, in July 2020. Comer said that, so far, implementation hasn't been

very difficult and the predictive technology seems to be working.

"We are seeing that those who are predicted as likely to stay a year are, in fact, more likely to stay than other groups," he said.

The system is integrated with payroll operations and uses information on the manager in place for a given position, the existing turnover rate in that area, a potential employee's commute time, and even how long the applicant hovers on certain web pages during the application process, Comer said.

Myra Norton, president and CEO at Arena, said that the platform gathers a wide variety of data that come from

WORKERRECRUITING &RETENTION

three buckets: about the job that needs to be filled, about the job seekers or applicants themselves, and from outcomes data collected from the company about how jobs were filled, who stayed, and who left and why.

"All of that data feeds the platform to make a more accurate prediction," she explained, adding that Arena's platform has been able to help facilities achieve an average turnover reduction of approximately 21%.

Companies that use the platform, she said, get better results over time as it collects more data from an organization. More data on turnover, behavior changes and hiring trends become available, helping organizations refine their hiring and retention efforts.

"Industry-wide, turnover has been going up," Norton said. "In our clients, we are seeing turnover stay stabilized and, in many cases, actually decrease."

First 90 days important

Turnover is an important issue for intuitive learning platforms to take on because 40% of turnover in senior living and care facilities happens in the first 90 days, according to OnShift's Corless.

Approximately a third to half of those employees work second jobs outside of long-term care to make ends meet, making scheduling issues another concern for three-fourths of industry workers. An estimated 75% of workers have less than $500 in personal savings, but 80% are reported to also struggle with burnout, Corless said.
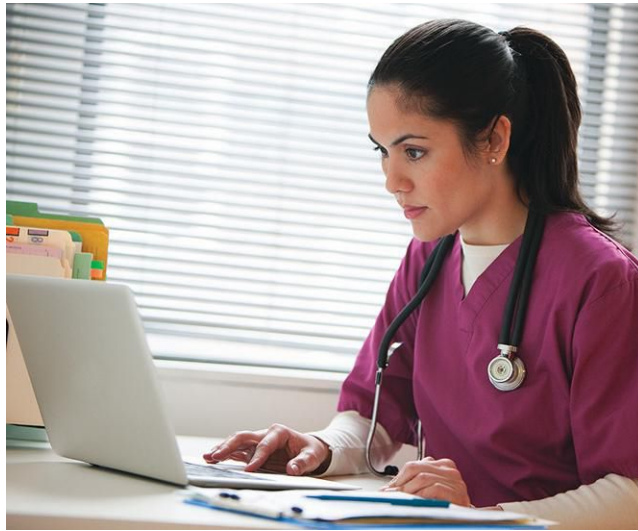
Technology can help attract and keep workers by making

Technology can help make the application process easier.

Photo: Jose Luis Pelaez Inc/DigitalVision/Getty Images Plus

"I THINK TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP US QUICKLY GATHER FEEDBACK."

— Tommy Comer, chief human resource officer, Commonwealth Senior Living

the application process easier, allowing for flexible and nontraditional scheduling and time clock punching, access to earned pay between pay dates, and quick real-time surveys that regularly poll workers anonymously to increase employee engagement, he said. Specifically, Corless said, allowing workers to have between-paycheck access to the wages they already have earned, through apps such as PayActiv, which powers OnShift Wallet, can help relieve a big burden for workers struggling to pay bills before pay day.

Updating how employers communicate with staff was another big issue during the

pandemic, Corless added. OnShift saw a 28% increase in messages sent to staff through its platform over the past year, he said. Those text updates ranged from messages about personal protective equipment to open shifts, and they allowed employers to quickly and easily reach workers.

In terms of results, Corless said, platform users have reported turnover reduction rates ranging from 9% to 33%. Turnover isn't the only metric the platform measures, though. In the facility that had a 9% reduction in turnover, recognition efforts facilitated by the platform helped boost employee satisfaction by 52%, he said.

More workers always needed

Even when workers are satisfied, however, additional ones are always needed.

"Part of how we're helping is that we've found workers from nontraditional pools of talent," Arena's Norton said.

In many cases, she said, that pool includes workers from the hospitality industry — another workforce battered by the pandemic — who are well-suited to healthcare because of their customer service and compassionate approach to service.

"From a recruitment standpoint, it's about trying to get in front of new talent groups. Folks who may have been hurt by the pandemic in other ways and see the work as mission-related," Commonwealth's Comer explained. "They may want a job that is more consistent. We are trying to get in front of more young people who may not realize this is a career."

Tech is a lifeline

There is no easy answer to the staffing problems facing long-term care, but technology appears to be offering a lifeline. For operators across the country, there's still a long way to go, but Comer said that using technology to get to the root of employee turnover and predict who is most likely to stay has helped move Commonwealth in the right direction.

"I don't look at our numbers and think we've solved it, but I do think we're being intentional about it," he said. "We're definitely asking more questions than we were five years ago. We are trying to get more feedback, understand the employee experience and operationalize changes." ■

Operators pivot with technology to fill beds and units, ease move-ins

Virtual tours, lease-signing solutions are here to stay

By Amy Novotney

Senior living communities and skilled nursing facilities turned to technology out of necessity during the pandemic in an effort to stay in touch with prospective residents and their families and to facilitate move-ins in restrictive times.

Although both sectors have been challenged by all-time lows in occupancy due to public fears about safety, cleanliness, isolation and loneliness, industry experts expect that technology, including virtual tours, electronic lease-signing and other contact-free, high-tech services will play a key role in helping operators rebuild census.

"Prior to COVID, maybe some potential residents and families were interested in virtual visits and other marketing and resident-service related technologies, but COVID has now made these things much more common," said Bill Kauffman, senior principal at the National Investment Center for Seniors Housing & Care. "Families are going to be looking for these services, so operators who have not increased their investment in technology are going to be playing at a disadvantage."

Although most providers recognize that an in-person tour is one of the best ways for prospective residents and their families to get a real feel for a facility's amenities and ambiance, amid the pandemic, many switched to virtual tours provided via video

Operators can send leases electronically to family members who can't come into the building.

Photo: ilkercelik/E+/Getty Images Plus

or through platforms such as FaceTime. Those can be effective ways to reach potential residents without having visitors on the property, said Jayne Sallerson, chief operating officer and partner at Naperville, IL-based Charter Senior Living.

"We do virtual tours and try to connect with [families] as best we can during the transition of moving someone in during this time," she said, adding that the process is taking a bit more hand-holding than before.

Lori Alford, co-founder and chief operating officer of Avanti Senior Living, agreed, noting that virtual tours, if done correctly by targeting a resident's and family's areas of greatest interest, still offer an opportunity for one-on-one interactions, and they can be very convenient, especially when the potential resident's adult children live out of town. For this and other reasons, Alford said she expects use of this technology to stick around and even expand.

"It's all about what's convenient for the adult children," she said. "We have to meet customers' needs, and the pandemic has helped us all realize that there are other ways to get to the same end."

Tech has made its way into other marketing and programming activities, too, with operators reporting that they plan to continue offering those services via technology even as in-person events take place post-pandem-

ic, according to NIC Executive Survey data collected in March.

The pandemic also helped popularize electronic lease-signing at Avanti. Using DocuSign software, the operator can send leases to family members who can't come into the building.

A staff member will explain the document. Once signed, the lease is electronically uploaded into the resident's business agreement. Even as more families have been able to begin entering the building, leases still are being signed this way on one of Avanti's tablets.

"It saves paper, and it's a more efficient process, so we have plans to make this our standard process going forward," Alford said. ∎

WORKFORCE EFFICIENCIES

Leveraging tech can streamline tasks in senior living, skilled nursing

Mobile apps, social robots and Bitcoin are among options

By Kimberly Bonvissuto

What do a mobile app, a "gossip bot" and Bitcoin all have in common?

All three are examples of how technology has been tapped to address some of long-term care's most pressing issues.

Mobile app

In an effort to streamline its processes during the COVID-19 pandemic, Atria Senior Living leaned on a mobile app to create a roadmap for retooling its care program. What began as a way to communicate activities and dinner menus turned into a communication tool to help the provider and families track residents' status.

Atria was able to leverage existing technology to keep families updated on the health of loved ones and provide mandated ongoing surveillance for early detection of the coronavirus.

Staff members use the app for digital documentation, medication administration and incident report tracking.

"For staff, it was a big time-saving thing," said Joanna Mansfield, senior vice president of care and life guidance. Staff feedback led to a feature enabling the scheduling of family visits once communities started reopening, she added.

More than 8,000 users have registered for and downloaded the app, which the company plans to build on.
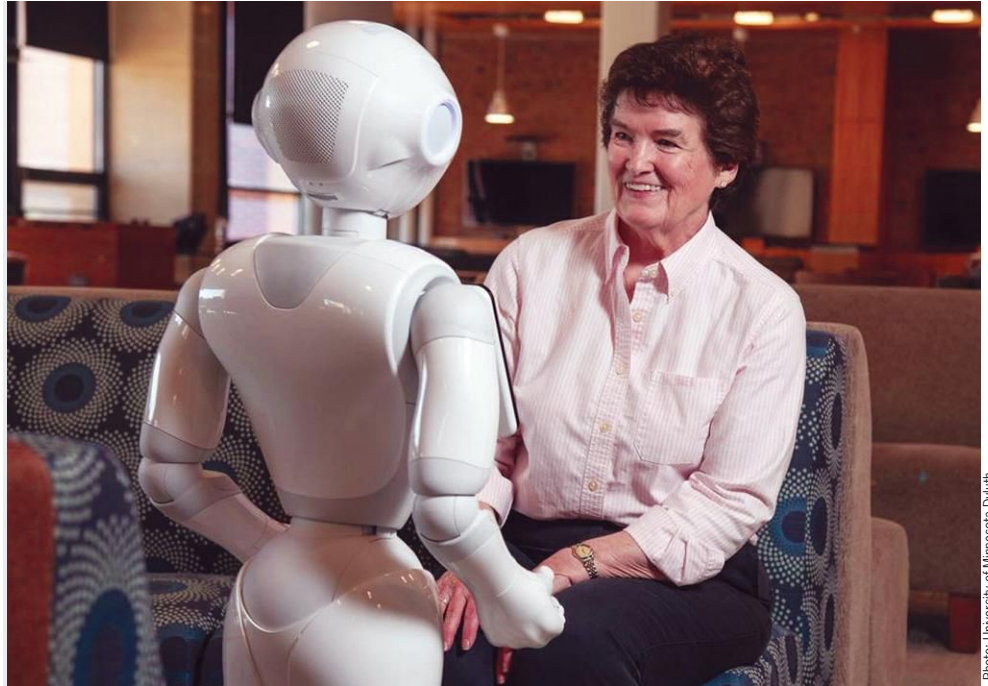

Pepper, a so-called social robot, is being studied as a way to help overwhelmed frontline workers.

Photo: University of Minnesota Duluth

Bitcoin

English Meadows Senior Living in Virginia now is accepting Bitcoin as payment for services. The company set up a digital wallet and supplied information to families that expressed an interest in making payments using the cryptocurrency.

CEO Mike Williams calls it a hospitality move. He anticipates that 1% to 2% of families will pay with Bitcoin, adding that it doesn't cost the provider anything and is accommodating to families.

"Essentially, someone could just pay our wallet instantly," Williams said. "If you sent me $4,000 in Bitcoin, I could easily, instantly, transfer it into dollars and have it deposited that day or the next day into our corporate account."

Gossip bot

Pepper, a social robot — or "gossip bot" — is being studied as a solution to address overwhelmed frontline long-term care workers and residents who are experiencing loneliness.

Using cameras and sensors, Pepper can detect facial expressions, tone of voice and physical movement, as well as monitor pulse, body temperature, balance and sleep habits. The technology is being eyed as a way to help older adults with dementia maintain their quality of life.

A University of Minnesota Duluth research team is investigating the feasibility of combining assistive therapeutic robots, an intelligent pill dispenser and wearable sensors to complement human caregiving.

"We are using technology in helping them at least maintain their quality of life, if not improving their quality of life," said Arshia Khan, Ph.D., computer science associate professor.

All three technology types were adapted to specific demographics, providing efficiencies for providers while addressing an employee, resident or family need. ∎

Pandemic sparks renewed focus on tackling infections in facilities

Ventilation, filtration, purification solutions among choices

By Amy Novotney

The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a renewed focus on infection control and prevention among both skilled nursing and senior living providers.

Although nursing home operators have years of experience in meeting standards and regulations related to infection control, all long-term care operators now are looking to assure potential residents and others that their facilities are clean. Beyond that, many states as well as the federal government are preparing to enforce even stricter regulations when it comes to infection control in senior living and care facilities.

Technology has emerged as an important tool in helping operators provide staff members and residents with the best defense against the inevitability of future pandemics, by updating ventilation, air filtration and air purification systems.

"Nursing homes were not set up to mitigate disease; they were built for efficiency," said Richard Gamache, MS, FACHCA, CEO of Aldersbridge Communities. Earlier this year, Aldersbridge's Linn Health & Rehabilitation in East Providence, RI, received $1 million in federal and state grants to help the long-term care provider add infrastructure to combat the spread of COVID-19. The facility is using the money to transform 11 skilled nursing rooms from semi-private

More tech: LG Electronics has announced that it is developing an autonomous robot that will use ultraviolet light to disinfect high-touch, high-traffic areas.

Photo: LG

to private and to equip every room with the latest in ventilation, lighting and technology for infection control. The facility also will be upgrading its air filtration system to improve air flow, air purity and decontamination efforts.

Aldersbridge is just one of many long-term care operators looking to use technology to upgrade infection control and prevention efforts post-pandemic. When co-developers Confluent Senior Living and MorningStar Senior Living open their newest senior living community this summer in Denver's Observatory Park neighborhood, the building will include the latest protec-

tions for residents' physical health, including needlepoint bipolar ionization through its HVAC system. Many experts view this technology as a solution that can address "shared air" problems faced by many congregate living settings. It works by creating ions that circulate into a conditioned space to mitigate pathogens, airborne particulates, allergens, chemical pollutants and odors.

This certified air purification technology has been one of the most effective tools in the fight against the COVID-19 virus and will continue to protect long-term care residents for years to come, said Sunshine Living CEO Luis Serrano. In April,

Bend, OR-based Sunshine announced that it had installed the technology at all of its 21 assisted living and memory care communities as well as at several of its independent living communities.

The new Confluent/Morning-Star community in Denver also will include a novel disinfection technology known as electrostatic sprayers, which disperse positively charged particles to neutralize infectious diseases.

Disinfection technologies such as the sprayers afford healthcare professionals the opportunity to easily and consistently disperse Environmental Protection Agency-registered disinfectants on potentially contaminated surfaces and cover large surface areas with ease, said J. Hudson Garrett Jr., Ph.D., MSN, MPH, FNAP, president and CEO of Community Health Associates and a consultant with Clorox Healthcare.

"The use of an electrostatic sprayer to disinfect the clinical environment of care can significantly improve room turnover, reduce overall costs and reduce the incidence of cross-contamination when used according to the manufacturer's instructions," he said. "Novel disinfecting technologies can play a pivotal role in decreasing the spread of pathogens and stopping transmission between residents, staff, visitors and the care environment." ∎

ISOLATION & LONELINESS

Will tech continue to help providers combat resident loneliness?

By Amy Novotney

The number of residents in senior living communities who reported always feeling lonely jumped by an alarming 230% during the pandemic, according to a survey by person-centered content provider iN2L. The data, presented in iN2L's "Bridging the Loneliness Gap" report, also show that more than 60% of senior living and care leaders reported being less able to create tailored engagement activities for residents compared with pre-pandemic times.

Technology — often in the form of Zoom or FaceTime calls and online activities with other residents — has proved vital in combating the challenge of vitiation shutdowns and the isolation of residents being restricted to their units. With many residents and their families now vaccinated against COVID-19 and visitation restrictions being lifted across the country, however, questions remain as to whether senior living and care providers will continue to harness technology to keep residents connected.

The answer, many say, is a resounding yes.

As at other long-term care organizations, early on in the pandemic, executives at Atria Senior Living quickly realized the importance of using technology to keep residents connected, self-sufficient and happy. As a result, the company began teaching residents at its more than 200 locations across

Tablet computers helped long-term care residents keep in touch with loved ones during the pandemic.

the United States and Canada how to include more technology in their lives so that they could better connect with their loved ones and the outside world and retain independence regardless of pandemic restrictions.

One of the pandemic's silver linings in senior living and care has been the recognition that technology really can play an important role in connecting people and enhancing lives, especially when people are forced to remain physically distanced from one another, said Chris Nall, Atria's chief technology officer.

"Our job as senior living providers is to help our residents live their best lives, regardless of

circumstances," he said. "Technology is just one tool we have, but it opens so many doors into better living."

Pam Ferris, president and CEO of Seacrest Village, agreed. The Encinitas, CA-based retirement community received several iPads via donation when COVID-19 hit and was able to start a comprehensive Zoom/FaceTime program for residents to stay connected.

"This turned out to be one of the most wonderful programs that came out of COVID," Ferris said. The organization was managing approximately 35 calls a day during the pandemic's peak and hired additional staff to manage the program. "But it

was really worth it, because at the end of the day, it kept people connected with their families all over the world," she said during a recent Leadership Huddle of the National Investment Center for Seniors Housing & Care.

Now that the campus has opened up visitation, that number has been reduced, but Ferris noted that Seacrest still is managing about 16 virtual visits a day through the program, particularly within its skilled nursing and memory care areas.

In addition to offering opportunities for residents to connect with family and fellow residents during the pandemic, technology — particularly virtual reality experiences — also has helped providers keep residents engaged and improve wellness and quality of life. Several operators say they have seen near-immediate positive benefits from allowing residents to roam through virtual environments.

"I think COVID really strengthened the need for that," said Megan Ulrich, vice president of marketing and business development at Maple Knoll Village. The Springdale, OH, senior living community purchased extra VR headsets amid the pandemic. "People were combating depression, isolation and loneliness, and if we can give them an opportunity to experience new education, travel somewhere safely without ever leaving their home, this is something that is going to be a huge benefit to our seniors." ■

Tests of drones, Google Health could boost healthcare provision

**By Kimberly Bonvissuto and
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Government reimbursement and regulatory changes during the pandemic accelerated long-term care providers' reliance on telehealth to improve resident access to healthcare.

Some operators even began offering it on-site to employees.

The Woodlands, TX-based Avanti Senior Living, for instance, extended access to its telehealth services to its employees for free, seeing the move as another way to limit infection. As additional benefits, Chief Operating Officer Lori Alford said, the company realized the lowest overtime and call-off rates in company history.

Meanwhile, technology being developed at the University of Cincinnati someday might help facilitate telehealth in hard-to-reach places or settings that typically do not have healthcare staff, such as independent living.

A prototype telehealth drone can carry medicine and medical supplies as well as collect self-administered lab tests, and it has cameras and a display screen to enable people to talk to healthcare professionals.

"We can perform all kinds of functions: chronic disease management, postoperative care monitoring, health coaching and consultations," said Debi Sampsel, MSN, director of telehealth in the UC College of Nursing.

Technology promises to ease healthcare access and provision

The University of Cincinnati is testing a drone that can carry medicine and medical supplies and collect tests.

in long-term care in other ways in the future as well.

For instance, a clinical search tool for electronic health records being piloted by about 250 clinicians eventually will be rolled out to Ascension's senior living and care communities to improve resident, patient and caregiver experiences, according to the parent company.

Ascension and Google Health are testing a new Care Studio platform that will leverage Google's "expertise in organizing information" by enabling medical professionals to type what they're looking for into a clinical search feature to quickly find information and records, according to a published report. The two companies partnered in 2018 on the project.

Ascension is the parent of

Ascension Living, operator of more than 40 senior living and care facilities. The health system also operates 145 hospitals.

The tool, according to the Care Studio website, gives clinicians a "single, centralized view that automatically brings forward a patient's important information, including hospital visits, outpatient events, laboratory tests, medications, and treatment and progress notes."

Google and Ascension began testing the tool in Nashville, TN, and Jacksonville, FL, and are expanding the pilot to additional medical professionals. Following feedback from pilot clinicians and a period of "quality assurance and improvement," the clinical search tool will be made available to caregivers across Ascension's 2,600 sites

of care in 20 states and the District of Columbia, including the senior living and care facilities.

In a blog post in February, Eduardo Conrado, Ascension executive vice president of strategy and innovation, said that the pandemic called for "dramatic changes" to better serve its communities.

"We sought to deploy an integrated longitudinal record that provides a complete clinical history for each of our patients, and make that record accessible and searchable by our clinicals," he said. "This approach will organize each patient's historical diagnoses, laboratory tests, medications, treatments and progress notes so that our clinicians can surface the relevant information needed when it's needed." ■

MANAGER'STOOLBOX
Managing Your Property

System aids critical preventive maintenance, compliance reporting

By Kimberly Bonvissuto

If the pandemic has taught senior living and care managers anything, it's that preventive maintenance is not optional.

Ensuring health and safety compliance is critical for operators, according to Dan Roberge, CEO of Maintenance Care. The company's computerized maintenance management system, or CMMS, software is designed to help providers improve communication to and from the maintenance department to keep a facility in compliance through a fail-safe procedural tool.

Maintenance Care's CMMS provides the tools necessary for documentation, task coordination and internal communication before a crisis occurs, Roberge said. The three major components of the system are daily reactive work orders, scheduled / preventive maintenance and asset management.

The system provides communication from nursing staff to the maintenance department instantaneously for uninterrupted task assignments, even during a crisis, Roberge said, and the software helps buildings maintain an updated inventory of equipment and supplies and can track repairs and dollars spent. Additionally, he said, the CMMS automatically catalogues processes and tasks, providing an instant record for auditing teams.

The system also can include extra protocols, such as keeping track of the washing of high-touch surfaces, refilling of hand sanitizer stations, and personal protective equipment inventory levels, Roberge said.

"All of those things that are specific to a breakout, you can easily implement those scheduled items into new routines," he said. "These are key areas affecting a facility on a day-to-day basis."

Maintenance Care's CMMS also assists with compliance reporting, Roberge said. If a community does experience an illness breakout, the software can be used to show due diligence and that a community "tried its best to fall under compliance."

Roberge said Maintenance Care's CMMS is flexible enough to take care of a facility's day-to-day activities but easy to adapt during a pandemic or other crisis to keep a community operating.

By using the planning and communication features of the CMMS, facility teams can help the maintenance department develop, implement and evaluate an infection control program; train personnel in enhanced infection control protocols; audit the infection control program; analyze post-closure and pre-opening procedures; assist community agencies; and provide enhanced security. All of those features are built into the cost of the system, including consultation on how to adapt the software as needed. ■

Photo: Yuichiro Chino/Moment/Getty Images Plus

Preventive maintenance is not optional for long-term care providers.

3 Tips

1 **Educate yourself on the effective requirements of prevention.**

Keeping systems up and running is critical. When a crisis occurs, a well-maintained community can respond quickly and focus on critical intervention measures while staff members focus on residents.

2 **Implement a scheduled routine within the CMMS.**

Whether it's cleaning HVAC systems or replacing filters, scheduled maintenance can extend the life of equipment, prevent the spread of illness and establish compliance with a record of tasks completed.

3 **Audit your work to fall under compliance.**

Management can use the CMMS to create internal audits and run reports. CMMS software also can be used for physical audits, to address checklists during building walkthroughs.

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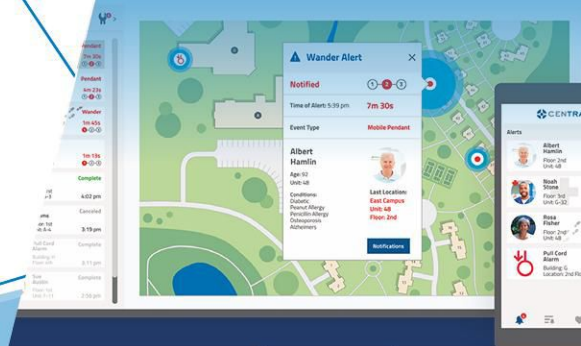
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