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Virtual Senior Center Connects Homebound Seniors to Community and Family

A demonstration project developed by Microsoft, the city of New York and Selfhelp Community Services shows how technology can reduce social isolation, increase wellness and enhance quality of life for homebound seniors.

NEW YORK — March 10, 2010 — Microsoft Corp., the city of New York and Selfhelp Community Services Inc. today unveiled their Virtual Senior Center, an innovative public-private partnership and demonstration project that is showing how cities can use technology to revitalize senior centers and enhance the lives of homebound seniors. The Virtual Senior Center uses computer, video and Internet technology to create an interactive experience for homebound seniors that reduces social isolation and gives them better access to community services.

“The New York City Department for the Aging is deeply committed to improving the quality of life for older New Yorkers, and this partnership with Microsoft and Selfhelp Community Services in creating the Virtual Senior Center is one more step toward making New York City the most age-friendly city in the nation,” said Lilliam Barrios-Paoli, commissioner of the New York City Department for the Aging (DFTA). “Senior centers are the social hub for many older New Yorkers, and this new model — the Virtual Senior Center — has shown us that technology will help seniors age in place and remain integrated into the community by bringing that same senior center experience into the home.”

Creating the Virtual Senior Center

The Virtual Senior Center demonstration project — jointly undertaken by Microsoft, the New York City DFTA and the Department of Information Technology & Telecommunications (DoITT), and Selfhelp Community Services — links six homebound seniors (ranging in age from 67 to 103) to Selfhelp’s Benjamin Rosenthal Senior Center in Flushing, Queens. Each of the six seniors’ homes is equipped with a desktop computer running Windows 7 as well as a touch-screen monitor, a small video camera, a microphone and broadband Internet service.

“Broadband technology is the new infrastructure of the 21st century, and serves as a bridge by which an increasing number of homebound seniors are linked to family, friends, activities and services,” said Carole Post, DoITT commissioner. “The Virtual Senior Center, and the important role it plays in improving the lives of these seniors, should serve as a model for public-private partnerships in expanding broadband adoption among underserved populations across the five boroughs.”

Video cameras and monitors have been strategically placed around the senior center to enable the homebound seniors to interact with classmates and instructors at the center, and to take part in activities such as armchair yoga, painting classes, current events discussions and tai chi. Using the technology, seniors at home can see and hear the other people in the class and actively participate in two-way discussions and activities. Since beginning the project, some have even made new friends. It’s Never 2 Late, a Colorado company that creates specialty technology packages for seniors, provides the custom interface.

Seniors with age-related impairments use assistive technology, such as screen readers or track balls, or take advantage of some of the built-in accessibility options and programs in

Windows 7 that make it easier for them to see, hear and use their computers, such as the full-screen magnifier.

Participating seniors also have full access to the Internet and are finding new ways to re-engage with the world. One senior woman now enjoys live streaming religious services from New York Central Synagogue, and uses a video link to communicate face-to-face with her children and grandchildren. Many of the seniors play games online, watch videos or listen to music, and use programs designed to improve memory and cognitive function. One of the men in the project used the Internet to track down former co-workers and to get reacquainted with a childhood friend he hadn't seen in more than 70 years. He has also started ordering groceries online and is exploring ways to streamline and expand his home-based business.

“Even in a large and vibrant city like New York, people can feel isolated and alone,” said Bonnie Kearney, director of Marketing for Trustworthy Computing at Microsoft. “At Microsoft, we work with governments, technology partners and nonprofit organizations around the world to create inclusive communities that welcome people because of their abilities rather than excluding them, even inadvertently, because of their disabilities. One way we help make that possible is by continually developing accessible technology that is safer and easier to use.

“As personal computers and the Internet become increasingly important in our society, many seniors — especially homebound seniors — are being left behind because they don't have access to technology or an opportunity to learn the necessary skills,” Kearney said. “With the Virtual Senior Center, this innovative public-private partnership is demonstrating a model that other cities can use to help homebound seniors stay connected and keep contributing to their communities.”

The Need for Homebound Senior Services Is Growing

People are living longer, and the population is aging rapidly. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2030 the number of people who are 65 and older will be growing faster than the total population in every state — and 26 states will have doubled their senior population by that date.

As people age, many become homebound due to chronic illness, injury or various age-related disabilities. Currently, there are at least 2 million homebound seniors in the United States, according to a report published in the Journal of the American Medical Association. As the population ages, however, the number of homebound seniors with multiple chronic conditions and disabilities will increase dramatically — a trend that is creating deep concerns for cities and other governments that provide services and benefits to seniors as well as baby boomers and other family members who must care for aging parents or other relatives.

“Homebound seniors who are unable to visit their local senior centers or participate in outside activities with their friends often feel lonely and isolated, which can lead to depression, dementia, poor health and a lower quality of life,” said Stuart Kaplan, CEO, Selfhelp Community Services. “For seniors who are homebound, using the Internet to stay connected to family, friends, caretakers, social workers and community services can yield tremendous health and wellness benefits by enriching their lives, providing greater access to health resources and preserving their independence.”

One of the seniors was interested in learning more about Microsoft HealthVault, which offers people a way to better manage their health without leaving home. As a personal health-management platform, HealthVault connects with health and wellness applications as well as home health-monitoring devices such as blood pressure cuffs and blood glucose monitors, which

generate information that users can make available to medical professionals, family members or other caretakers. That senior is now using HealthVault and the American Heart Association's free online heart health center, Heart360.org, to track and monitor his blood pressure. He can upload data from the blood-pressure cuff into his HealthVault account and share the information with his physician. Together, he and his doctor can track his progress and decide on the best course of treatment.

The Virtual Senior Center project included a psycho-social assessment that measured a number of attitudes, health attributes and emotional factors for the six participating seniors at the start of the program and at various stages. As a group, the seniors showed marked improvement throughout the course of the project.

“The opportunity for homebound seniors to interact virtually with caregivers, providers, peers, family members and friends has made a significant and measurable difference in the quality of their lives,” said Becky Bigio, director, Selfhelp Senior Source Geriatric Care Management Program. “Nearly all the candidates have described feeling more connected to others and show an increasing awareness and appreciation of those connections.”

New York City Department for the Aging

The Department for the Aging's (DFTA) mission is “to work for the empowerment, independence, dignity and quality of life of New York City's diverse older adults and for the support of their families through advocacy, education and the coordination and delivery of services.” It serves approximately 1.3 million New Yorkers age 60 and older in the five boroughs. DFTA assists seniors in remaining independent and involved in the life of their communities as they age.

New York City Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications

The Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT) enhances the way the City interacts with its residents, businesses, visitors, and employees by leveraging technology to enhance the delivery of City services. DoITT is currently leading a consortium of New York City entities to increase public access to, and adoption of, broadband technologies through public computer centers, school programs, and expansion of public Wi-Fi in parks.

About Selfhelp Community Services Inc.

For the past 70-plus years, Selfhelp Community Services, Inc., a non-profit organization, has been dedicated to enabling seniors and at-risk families to live in their own homes, independently and with dignity. We provide a comprehensive network of community-based home care, social services, and senior housing programs, which integrate progressive strategies and cutting-edge technologies that address the changing needs of our clients. In addition, we also operate the largest and oldest Nazi victim services program in the country for aged survivors of the Holocaust.

About Microsoft

Founded in 1975, Microsoft (Nasdaq “MSFT”) is the worldwide leader in software, services and solutions that help people and businesses realize their full potential.

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For more information about Microsoft aging and accessibility programs, New York aging and technology services, and Selfhelp Community Services, please visit:

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