



Tech use balloons in shrinking COVID-19 world

Devices and virtual care capabilities have become more than accessories

By Kimberly Marselas

Tablets, telehealth and other technology have long been part of the model of care at The Allure Group, a network of six New York City skilled nursing facilities.

Therapy robotics, remote monitoring and social engagement platforms were available to most of the chain's 1,400 clients, though many shied away from various technology because they simply weren't accustomed to it.

But since the COVID-19 outbreak arrived in the United States, devices and virtual care capabilities have become more than accessories. As is the case with many healthcare providers and senior living operators, Allure expects more — and more powerful — technology tools to remain a permanent and robust part of its business model long for the foreseeable future.

"While this pandemic has been uniquely difficult for all healthcare and eldercare facilities, having cutting-edge technology in place has helped us weather this most challenging time to the best of our abilities," said Joel Landau, Allure's founder and chairman. "If the crisis encourages a wider-spread adoption of life-saving technology, it's certainly a silver lining in an otherwise catastrophic event."

Majd Alwan, Ph.D., LeadingAge executive director for the Center for Aging Services Technologies, or CAST, tracks technology adoption among aging



Photos: The Allure Group

A resident uses an in-room tablet equipped with PadInMotion at The Allure Group in hard-hit New York City.

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services providers. LeadingAge and senior-focused investment bank Ziegler team up for an annual survey of the nation's 200 largest nonprofit aging services providers that pinpoints technology trends.

The 2019 report found technology adoption rates were stagnant in many categories

compared with previous years. Only the use of telehealth, telemonitoring and medication monitoring tools had grown significantly between 2013 and 2018.

Engagement growing

Social engagement tools have only just entered the tracking

survey, with almost half of all participating providers reporting use of some kind of tool offering connectedness via a mobile device or television.

But, Alwan acknowledged, the coronavirus and the social distancing requirements it has necessitated undoubtedly have changed the habits of providers and residents.

"The foot in the door we're seeing is the social connectedness aspect, but the developers are starting to layer in and exploit the platform for additional needs-based aspects, what I call the 'wants-based services,'" Alwan said.

If a community already has given its residents tablets, developers are jumping at the chance to equip that same device with medication reminders or community-wide messages or enable it with remote vitals-tracking services.

There also has been a spike in interest in voice command and voice interaction tools because of their intuitive user interfaces, Alwan said. Such devices can help with in-room needs such as food ordering or connecting with a concierge to schedule a telehealth visit.

If resident devices have cameras and secure access, then providers even can repurpose them for remote physician or therapy visits — and from there, providers are able to incorporate nurses' notes and diagnoses into their electronic medical records.

In 2018, about 75% of all LZ



200 technology survey participants used EMRs — many of them on the senior living side.

'At an inflection point'

Alwan expects the urgency of the current situation will turn some users into permanent adopters.

"We're at an inflection point," he said. "I don't see this going back to 'normal.' It will be similar to what's happening with telework and online trainings."

Usually, technology begets more technology, Alwan added. Don't necessarily expect providers that start spending money on telehealth services or engagement suites to cut back elsewhere in their technology budgets.

In fact, many will have to spend more to keep the services they're implementing now dependable and accessible. There likely will be more provider investments in network bandwidth, internet speed, blanket WiFi and related components, Alwan predicted.

"Clearly, the virtual realm and technology medium has just exploded during COVID-19," added Lisa McCracken, director of senior living research and development for Ziegler. "Yes, it's out of necessity. But people are also adapting really well and finding they may never go back. ...We have advanced more in the last two months than in the last several years."

Landau said that having his staff members trained to use technology pre-COVID-19 helped with increased use during the crisis. But restrictions on visitors — and shifts in how the federal government covers telehealth — also have encouraged



Photos: Ziegler, LeadingAge

Lisa McCracken, Ziegler director of senior living research and development, and Majd Alwan, Ph.D., executive director of LeadingAge Center for Aging Services Technologies.

reluctant seniors to use more technology.

For instance, Allure's year-old Samsung tablets are equipped with PadInMotion, which can power anything from food ordering to telemedicine solutions.

"While they initially provided residents with entertainment and stress relief, they are now helping them stay in touch with their loved ones over audio and video chats," Landau said.

User rates have "skyrocketed," he adds.

Allure staff members also added a "call tree" app that allows representatives to offer families hotline access for video conference scheduling or condition updates and rolled out Vis-a-Vis, a service for virtual doctor visits post-discharge. Patients are given a small, handheld device to take home and help manage their transi-

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tion through telehealth.

Vendors innovate in new ways

Providers and their employees aren't the only ones becoming more nimble. Vendors also have innovated in ways unthought of just a year or two ago.

"The companies that are able to do a quick pivot and add on services remotely [with no need for in-person installation], they've been at a strategic

advantage during this time," McCracken said.

Both she and Alwan expect that future LZ 200 surveys will reflect increased adoption, although the urgency of this year's crisis will make select categories spike. Other categories, such as the already highly popular EHR, likely will continue steadily chugging upward.

For every new technology adopted, of course, providers get more data about residents, their families and staff members. And savvy providers likely also will invest in tech that can put that information to work.

Coming from CAST

Later this year, CAST will launch a new selection service for data analytics tools that produce business intelligence, and Alwan expects the category to show up on the 2021 LZ 200 data. ■