

Broadband for Health Monitoring

New broadband applications installed in housing and care facilities help seniors live more independently.

By Mary Farley ■ *Steeplechase Networks*

In addition to changing the way we study, play, work and communicate, the Internet is now likely to affect how and where we will spend our senior years. Whether we are working or playing on the Internet today, by tomorrow we may be counting on our network connection for physician consultations, medication reminders and emergency response. Network-enabled health monitoring and care is an area of high demand, rapid growth and quick evolution of potential new services.

Five out of six (84 percent) Americans over the age of 50 expect an immediate family member to move into a senior living community within the next 10 years, while 24 percent over the age of 65 expect the same for themselves, according to a new national survey of American attitudes on assisted living released by the Coalition to Protect Choice in Senior Living (CPCSL). Members of the “sandwich generation,” with both growing children and aging parents, are trying to keep everything in balance, including influencing their parents’ choice between assisted living and staying at home longer. Internet-based solutions can support either choice, offering seniors, their families and com-

munities different paths leading to the same goals: dignity, care and communication. My organization, Steeplechase Networks Inc., works with a variety of telehealth partners to provide services over fiber or wireless broadband connections that will make these goals achievable for all.

BUILDING BRIDGES WITH FIBER

Seniors choose between independent living and care facilities based on their financial resources, geographical proximity, age and health, among many other factors. But every choice reflects certain basic desires: Seniors want to maintain their independence as much as possible and still access the care they need when they need it, without burdening their families. Family members want the highest quality of care while staying informed about the seniors’ needs. Communities want to maintain the participation of this educated, consuming, and voting constituency.

Independent living communities and assisted living communities try to bridge residents’ desire for independence with the need for some support and care, and position themselves to handle transitions toward the latter. Fiber-based connec-

tions can support the services that allow the bridge’s span to extend, thereby extending independence, enhancing care and ensuring communication.

The fact that fiber provides the connectivity enabling these services – and thereby extends the time that seniors can spend in their homes or in the communities of their choice – is a good argument for including fiber to the home when planning the development of senior housing MDUs. And, of course, it’s equally important to include FTTH in the construction of homes for younger families – “the sandwich generation” – in order to complete the communication link.

DELIVERING THE RIGHT CONTENT

The most compelling senior-oriented offerings allow instant two-way communication backed up by monitoring of key data stored for medical review. The information to be monitored and stored may include medication dispensing and usage, exercise, sleep times, blood pressure, glucose levels, meals and nursing visits. One of the providers we work with, Link-to-Life, offers both personal emergency response and health monitoring services. “Delivering our health monitoring services over broadband was a logical next step, and the Steeplechase platform allows us to do that seamlessly,” says Lawrence Rosenthal, chairman and CEO of Link-to-Life.

Interactive exercises that allow tracking of mental performance and cognitive abilities are another class of interesting applications. These services can transmit results from a home connection back to

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a central station for emergency response and notification or to a portal that family members can access on a regular or as-needed basis. From a campus connection like a senior living community, a nursing station can provide the monitoring and management of the data and distribute it as needed.

In communities where wireless coverage is ubiquitous, emergency response technologies can track wandering or “man down” problems within a few meters. These applications can also be tracked on mobile devices so that family members are never out of touch.

Steeplechase looks for cutting-edge applications to serve this market and works with proven telehealth partners to continue to broaden the offerings and deepen the end-user experience. Other services in development or recent deployment include videoconferencing between patients in their homes and physicians in their offices for medical and psychological consultations. In addition to eliminating tedious visits to the emer-

gency room and long delays in waiting rooms, these services allow distant family members to “attend” virtually as well as providing for the easy and accurate exchange of information. As health care providers develop care plans for patients, family members can participate, understand, and actively support next steps because of their active and engaged role in the process.

Is monitored living an Orwellian nightmare? The people who are using it don't feel that it is. For many seniors and their families, health monitoring expands choices and adds significantly to their peace of mind. In fact, decision makers are placing the level of connectivity and available services high on their checklist of requirements for a home or senior community. What used to be a “feature” is now a necessity in the eyes of those who are committed to independence, care and communication.

Steeplechase Networks looks for communities that want to differentiate them-

selves by connecting residents with the services they need. Fiber networks demonstrate a commitment on the part of a developer or a community to meet the needs and desires of residents today with the capacity to sustain the needs and desires of tomorrow. Steeplechase provides marketing services, back-shop support, and ongoing maintenance to help these communities achieve their business and program goals. You need to build the right bridges and deliver the right content to cross this generation gap. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Farley is the Operations & Planning Executive for Steeplechase Networks Inc., an applications and content delivery company for broadband networks. She previously worked as a regional director of one of the largest senior living providers in the US. She may be reached at 413-429-4166 or by e-mail at mfarley@scnets.com. For more information on Steeplechase Networks, visit www.scnets.com.

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