



Broadband monitoring, connectivity technology and social networking portal enabled the Ecumen at Home model which keeps participants socially engaged and connected to care

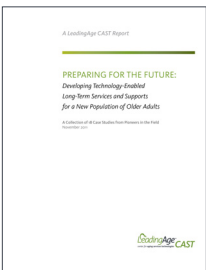
The thirteenth in a series of case studies from the Preparing for the Future Report

- Cost of remote monitoring are built into monthly rent in assisted living apartments
- Ecumen Connects offers a social networking portal that enables secure interaction with friends and family, access to entertainment and local content such as activities calendar and news customized by each Ecumen campus
- Plans are underway to leverage the Connects portal to offer caregiving coordination and a variety of technologies on a fee-for-service basis to Ecumen at Home program participants

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The Organization

The roots of the Ecumen organization date back to 1862 when the Lutheran Church began providing foster care in Minnesota. The organization began serving seniors at the beginning of the 20th Century as the Board of Christian Service and later as the Board of Social Ministry. The Ecumen name, adopted in 2004, comes from the Greek word for “home” and underscores the organization’s mission to create a home for older adults wherever they choose to live.

Ecumen operates a variety of senior housing options and services throughout Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota and Idaho. The organization’s 70 sites include 55 independent living and/or assisted living communities and 17 health care centers that employ 4,000 workers and serve more than 10,000 people. A new Ecumen at Home initiative offers a variety of in-home services designed to help older consumers in the Minneapolis and St. Paul area remain independent in their own homes. Services range from home cleaning, grocery shopping and errand services to home care and aging-in-place technologies.

Technology-Enabled Model or Service

Since 2003, Ecumen has expanded its reach beyond its bricks-and-mortar campuses in an effort to establish a market niche among older consumers living in their own homes. The organization’s mission to empower older people and help them remain independent led to the adoption of a variety of technology products and services:

Remote monitoring: QuietCare or Healthsense is available as a standard of care for residents of all Ecumen assisted living apartments. The cost of these devices is built into the monthly rent.

Ecumen at Home: In addition to other services, the Ecumen at Home program offers a variety of technologies on a fee-for-service basis to older people living in their own homes. These include the BeClose Wireless Monitoring system; the elder-friendly Jitterbug® cell phone; the MedSmart medication reminder and dispensing system from American Medical Alert Corp.; Dakim BrainFitness Software; the Presto Printing Mailbox, which receives emails and photos without a computer; and the VoiceCare Emergency Response system.

Social Networking: Ecumen Connects is a web-based communications portal that the organization is deploying in all of its communities. The portal has a social networking component that allows residents to create a secure online network of family and friends. It also offers recreational activities, such as movies, audio books and virtual tours of cities around the world. A customized local interface allows each Ecumen campus to create its own content for Ecumen Connects. That content could include an activities calendar and other local news of interest to residents.

Ecumen Connects Implementation Approach

Ecumen discovered the Connects portal while searching for social networking technology that could help residents communicate with their families and with one another. Staying socially connected can be a challenge for a subset of Ecumen residents and the organization's leadership saw Ecumen Connects as a way to improve quality of life among these residents.

The organization pays a monthly fee for its use of the Connects portal. Residents can access Ecumen Connects on their home computers or on computers located in the common areas of their communities. In addition, many of the campuses are developing group activities that involve watching the movies, taking the virtual tours or playing the games that are part of the Connects program.

Ecumen Connects also serves as a marketing tool for individual campuses, which can share the portal's web address with prospective residents interested in accessing the community's calendar of events or connecting with current residents through its social networking component. Ecumen is exploring the possibility of launching a version of Ecumen Connects for participants in the Ecumen at Home program. The community-based program will include an additional component that families can use to facilitate the coordination of informal caregiving tasks.

Challenges

Fitting championing tasks into an already-busy schedule:

Deploying the Ecumen Connects program across 70 communities presents a challenge for the organization, especially because success at the local level will depend on the ability of already-busy staff members to take ownership of the program and build it into a robust communications platform. So far, 22 Ecumen communities have launched the program. The organization facilitated these launches by identifying early adopters, supporting their efforts to get the program off the ground, and then making sure other communities heard about these early successes. Success

among early adopters has helped spread enthusiasm about the program to other Ecumen communities.

Introducing a new generation to social networking:

Ecumen residents have been relatively slow to adopt the social networking component of Ecumen Connects. A handful of residents at each site are using the platform to create and communicate with their online social networks. However, a sizable portion of older residents is still uncomfortable with computers and hesitant to become early adopters. Hand-on training of residents, and group activities that make use of the system's entertainment components, are helping to convince residents that the program is worth exploring. Ecumen expects that future residents, who will be younger and more comfortable with technology, will expect to have social networking platforms like Ecumen Connects in their communities.

Business Case

Ecumen adopted the Connects platform because it fit the organization's vision and values, not because it is expected to provide a return on investment. The organization's leadership team weighed the cost of the program, which is not expensive, against its potential to improve residents' quality of life, and decided to offer the program free of charge.

In contrast, Ecumen is definitely looking for a return on its investment from the Ecumen at Home program and the sale of technology devices to participants in that program. The organization worked hard to find the right combination of technology and services that would attract private-pay customers. The key to success, it feels, is offering products that are easy to use and viewed by consumers as useful tools that can help solve specific problems associated with aging-in-place. Most important, products need to be reasonably priced.

Price was a major factor in Ecumen's decision to offer the BeClose monitoring system in the Ecumen At Home Program, rather than the QuietCare units the organization deploys on campus. In addition, Ecumen determined that families did not need the sophisticated level of reporting available with QuietCare.

Ecumen at Home members can purchase the BeClose hardware for \$299 and pay \$49 a month for the monitoring service. Other products offered through Ecumen at Home are also priced competitively. The Presto Printing Mailbox, for example, sells for \$99 with a \$14.99 monthly fee while Ecumen at Home members can purchase the Jitterbug phone for \$89.99 and a \$14.99 monthly fee.

Keys to Success

An innovation culture: A workplace culture that actively encourages innovation has helped Ecumen gain staff support for various technology initiatives. The fact that Ecumen employees are expected to continually explore new ways of doing things makes them more comfortable with change and better able to implement new ideas. Ecumen has operationalized its innovation culture through two internal, computer-based networks: the “Innovation Station,” where employees share details about successful innovations they have implemented so their counterparts at other Ecumen communities can learn from those successes; and the “Idea Box,” which encourages staff to share early-stage ideas so their colleagues can offer their pre-implementation feedback.

Strong champions: The Ecumen Connects portal has a strong champion in the organization’s corporate office who has promoted the program’s implementation by visiting individual Ecumen communities and creating excitement about the program among local staff. Being a champion also involves recruiting other champions at each of the Ecumen sites. These local champions agree to learn the program and teach others to use it, create local content, and organize activities around various program components.

Advice to Others

Become an active product researcher. When it first started adopting technology, Ecumen depended on vendors to pitch products and services in which the organization might be interested in deploying. In recent years, however, Ecumen has become more proactive about identifying a need that it wants to address and then searching for vendors that can help it fulfill that need. Without that proactive approach, Ecumen might never have learned about the Connects program.

Pilot test before you buy. Ecumen pilots technology at sites where staff members have expressed a desire for the technology. It then solicits employee feedback on whether the technology works, whether it makes their jobs easier, and if the technology addresses the problem it was intended to solve. If Ecumen feels the technology is not achieving its intended goal, it ends the pilot and moves on.

Face resistance head on. Every organization will encounter natural resistance to any change that impacts the way employees do their jobs. Ecumen deals with that resistance by getting staff members involved in the adoption process and giving them ownership of the project through participation in interdisciplinary project teams. The organization makes a special effort to show staff members that they are being heard and that any help they need to use the new system will be made available. ■

LeadingAge Center for Aging Services Technologies:

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