

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Senior Communities Add Tech Assistance as One of Their Perks

Residents need help downloading apps, making Zoom calls, logging into doctors' appointments and much more

By Suzanne Oliver

Feb. 26, 2022 10:00 am ET

Frank Diaz offers weekly classes on topics like downloading apps and using QR codes. He also meets one-on-one with people, helping them to manage passwords or buy the right tablets.

His pupils: the residents of a senior-living community in California where he is tech concierge.

Increasingly, some tech savvy is required for the activities of daily living—such as connecting with friends via Zoom, shopping online, using smart TVs and setting up doctors' appointments. As a result, more independent and assisted-living communities are adding personal tech support to their list of amenities. Full-time tech concierges on the premises at high-end communities such as Atria Newport Beach in California, Inspir Carnegie Hill in New York City and the Watermark at Napa Valley in California, where Mr. Diaz works, help residents, at no additional charge, with their everyday tech needs.

The need for personalized tech support in senior-living communities has been increasing as residents acquire ever-growing numbers of personal digital devices. In a 2021 [survey](#), Linkage Connect, a provider of consumer research for the aging-adult marketplace, found that 83% of adults 55 and over own a smartphone, 66% own laptops and 58% own tablets.

"Couples are moving into retirement communities with five to seven devices," says Majd Alwan, senior vice president of technology and business strategy at LeadingAge, an association of nonprofit providers of aging services, and executive director of the group's Center for Aging Services Technologies.

But older adults often aren't as facile with the devices as younger generations are. According to a 2021 [survey](#) conducted by the Pew Research Center, more than half of Americans over age 65 and two-thirds of adults over age 75 have little confidence in their ability to set up and use their digital devices.

That was a particular problem when, during the pandemic lockdowns, those devices became residents' lifelines to the outside world. The staff in senior communities could hardly keep up with requests for assistance with smartphones, tablets, Zoom, FaceTime and telehealth visits. Community volunteers who had helped in the past were no longer allowed to enter the buildings due to visiting restrictions. As a result, all staff members, including maintenance workers and drivers who knew how to use a cellphone, were conscripted to help residents get online.

That experience, on top of the rising use of smart devices in general by residents of high-end retirement homes, has led senior-community operators to formalize and expand their

tech-support programs.

“Many senior communities have on-site computer classes,” says Tom Kamber, executive director of the nonprofit Older Adults Technology Services and Senior Planet from AARP. “The tech concierge is new. I think it is a great idea.”



Tech concierge Frank Diaz helps a resident at the Watermark senior-living facility digitize a vaccine card.

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Everyday needs

In addition to leading classes for residents at the Watermark once a week, Mr. Diaz schedules one-on-one visits. He says most of the requests he receives are for help with password management, application downloads, setting up accounts with services including Zoom, Uber and Instacart, and logging into streaming services such as Netflix. Recently Mr. Diaz helped two residents set up receivers to connect their hearing aids to their televisions and helped another purchase an iPad and set up a digital newspaper subscription that enabled him to get his news earlier in the morning, and in larger type.

While full-time tech concierge service without fees is a rarity, most senior-living communities offer some form of fee-based tech training and support, says LeadingAge’s Mr. Alwan. While industrywide pricing data isn’t available, Mr. Alwan says typical fees charged by LeadingAge members that provide senior housing are \$12.50 to \$25 for 15-minute sessions. In many communities, if there is no full-time person, frequently an IT employee or other staff member will step in to troubleshoot residents’ tech problems. Quick fixes of this sort are often free. In some communities, local volunteers and other residents also offer tech support at no charge.

Some senior communities outsource tech support. In California, residents of the upscale Vi at La Jolla Village in San Diego and Vi at Palo Alto, part of Chicago-based Vi, a developer and operator of senior-living communities, get virtual assistance through Candoo Tech, whose concierges are trained to work with older adults. According to Mellany Hanson, lifestyle director at Vi at La Jolla Village, Vi pays half of an undisclosed annual fee for residents, for which they get two 90-minute, one-on-one learning sessions, unlimited 30-minute help sessions, and one group class per month. Additional computer sessions or longer help sessions are available for an additional discounted price.



Tech concierge Frank Diaz teaching a class at the Watermark senior-living facility.

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Social lifeline

Help with Zoom is a frequent request for tech concierges in Vi communities. Last year, Ms. Hanson says, a concierge at La Jolla Village helped a 90-year-old resident set up a Zoom account so she could continue to attend meetings of a charitable organization for former flight attendants.

Maintaining social ties is the No. 1 reason seniors are buying and using more digital devices, says LeadingAge's Mr. Alwan. A [study](#) published in the Journals of Gerontology found that internet use among retired older adults reduced the probability of depression by 33%.

The increasing use of technology in senior living—for instance, to control lighting, shades, temperature and smart TVs—is becoming an invaluable part of the experience. Such tech provides greater independence, social engagement, health, safety and quality of life for residents, says Brian Geysler, vice president of clinical innovation and population health at Maplewood Senior Living, owners of Inspir Carnegie Hill. Training, teaching classes and troubleshooting residents' devices, Mr. Geysler says, keeps the tech concierge “very, very busy.”

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