

## **ALBANY GUARDIAN SOCIETY: 2010 Great Ideas In Aging Contest**

*Before this project, I was bored to death. I was just waiting for my time to finish. Now all of a sudden, I'm wide awake. I'm alive again.* – Milton, a trailblazer in Selfhelp's groundbreaking Virtual Senior Center.

**Sponsoring Agency:** Selfhelp Community Services, Inc., 520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018.

Celebrating 75 years, Selfhelp enables almost 20,000 seniors and at-risk families each year to remain in their own homes, independently and with dignity. Selfhelp provides a comprehensive network of community based social services, including senior centers, Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs), social adult day programs, case management, legal resources, community guardianship, Senior Source (private pay geriatric care management), home health care and senior housing programs. Selfhelp also operates the largest Nazi Victim Services program in the country, serving over 5,000 Holocaust survivors a year. Our cutting-edge technology programs in clients' homes enhance their safety and quality of life.

**Initial Problem to be Addressed:** Despite living in a large and energetic city, homebound seniors can still feel alone, isolated, and disconnected. As they age and become frail, seniors often experience a shrinking group of family, friends and reduced participation in activities. When coupled with chronic physical ailments, this situation may lead to anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

Historically, case management programs and senior centers have been integral to the elder care system's efforts to address seniors' needs for social stimulation. Homebound seniors who are no longer able to visit their local senior centers and participate in outside activities need an avenue to keep connected to their communities. Personal computers and the internet are increasingly important communication methods in our society. Without access to this technology, many of our seniors are being left behind, potentially underserved and disconnected from family, friends, social workers and community services.

**Brief Program Description:** To facilitate homebound seniors' independence and connection to their community, Selfhelp partnered with Microsoft Corporation, It's Never 2 Late (a technology vendor), the New York City Department for the Aging, and the New York City Department of Information, Technology and Telecommunication to develop the innovative Virtual Senior Center. Selfhelp's Virtual Senior Center uses computer and video technology to alleviate isolation and loneliness of homebound seniors. It provides internet-based real-time communication between homebound seniors and activities at their local senior center, as well as to the outside world.

Thirteen participants are participating in the pilot phase. They range in age from 68-103. Almost all are low-income. Approximately half are case managed clients receiving services such as Meals on Wheels, home care and social work services. All have no or little prior computer experience.

The Virtual Senior Center connects these seniors to the Selfhelp Benjamin Rosenthal-Prince Street Senior Center, which offers over 100 education, recreation, and wellness programs each year. Seniors are provided with a desktop computer equipped with a touch screen, webcam, microphone, and internet connection. They are provided with in-home training in computer basics, accessing senior center activities and the internet. The senior center is equipped with strategically placed video cameras, microphones, computers and Wi-fi.

Virtual Senior Center clients hold live interactive discussions with senior center participants. For example, the homebound clients' computers have a customized interface that allows them to touch a specific icon to virtually attend a current events class every Monday. Other activities include trivia, yoga, reminiscence, tai chi, concerts, wellness lectures, art classes and dancing. Interactive classes are facilitated by a teacher or graduate-level student interns who are trained to engage the homebound clients and those at the center in stimulating discussions. The customized interface may include extra-large icons, screen readers, screen magnifiers, specialized art programs, links to music videos and games, video blogs, one-click access to online newspapers and specialized access to real-life activities such as live services at a New York synagogue.

The Virtual Senior Center also helps caregivers, family members and case managers to monitor home-bound seniors' health and safety. Social workers virtually visit their clients via Skype on a regular basis to provide supports and to screen and help apply for entitlements. During these sessions, social workers can visually see that the client is safe, and introduce other technologies that support independent living such as personal health record systems and sensors in the home. A virtual friendly visiting program has also been established.

**How Does the Program Help/ Why Do You Like the Program:** The benefits to our clients are numerous. This program enhances wellness, reduces isolation and improves quality of life. Homebound participants connect with family, friends, social workers and other Virtual Senior Center participants. For example, a daughter living in California uses Skype to talk to her 103-year-old mother daily. Seniors use Skype to connect with each other on evenings and weekends when the senior center is closed. Visually connecting one-to-one strengthens their connection to community and each other as they create their own social network. In addition, through the interactive classes, both the homebound clients and the senior center participants can make new friendships or renew old ones, since many of the Virtual Senior Center clients previously attended the senior center. This new model has received national and international attention for showing that technology can help seniors age in place and remain integrated into their communities.

The Virtual Senior Center also facilitates independence in everyday activities. For example, some of the clients are ordering groceries, doing banking on line and researching various topics. Our seniors have become proficient in emailing friends, family and social workers, which strengthens their connection to one another. One senior regularly emails her granddaughter in Germany. Another used the internet to find a childhood friend he had not seen in 60 years. Overall, this program has opened up a new world to our vulnerable homebound elders. They report feeling challenged, independent, energized, renewed, smarter, and healthier both emotionally and cognitively. Many initially thought they could not master the technology but later expressed how much this program has boosted their self- confidence.

**Total Program Cost and Major Income Sources:** Costs are estimated at approximately \$200 per year for support services for those seniors who already have computers and internet service. For seniors requiring a computer, internet service and support services, the cost is approximately \$2200 (less expensive computers are available reducing the cost and local internet costs could vary). Microsoft Corporation was the funder for the initial project that also included getting the senior center ready with technology (wifi, web cameras, computers, all of which we estimate to be approximately \$15,000 plus annual internet fees). Selfhelp, the New York City Department for the Aging and the New York City Department of Information, Technology and Telecommunication provide staffing and share their expertise and resources. Selfhelp was recently awarded a UJA-Federation of New York Safe and Sound grant to expand the Virtual Senior Center, focusing on new content, a new virtual chat lounge, involvement of volunteers for virtual friendly visiting and technical support team. The grant will also fund an evaluation virtual case management procedures and a study to produce recommendations for scaling up the Virtual Senior Center project to 100+ clients. Selfhelp also has a UJA-Federation of New York planning grant to determine ways to make the program financially sustainable and replicable in multiple communities.

**Special Issues/Characteristics:** The first phase of the Virtual Senior Center project included a psycho-social assessment of six seniors that measured a number of attitudes, health and emotional factors, at the start of the original program and at various stages. Overall, the group showed marked improvement throughout the course of the program. The seniors described feeling more connected to others.

A special issue related to the Virtual Senior Center is expansion and sustainability. With funding, there could be networks of senior centers connected through the internet. A homebound senior could virtually attend classes at a center in another city and possibly senior programs throughout the world.

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