

App connects St. Peters seniors to family

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A group of local seniors is learning how to bridge the digital divide between them and their grandchildren thanks to a new app.

The technology being piloted at Emeritus at Oak Tree Village in St. Peters is designed to make social networking and emailing easy for seniors. It also seeks to bring them information, learning and entertainment opportunities.

Called "My Emeritus," the app has been designed by Emeritus Senior Living, the parent organization of Emeritus at Oak Tree Village, and technology company Sitelligence. Emeritus at Oak Tree Village is one of eight senior living communities among the almost 480 Emeritus operates nationally chosen for the launch.

"Only 37 percent of 85-year-olds are using technology, but of course it's the primary way that virtually all of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren communicate," said Ginna Baik, Emeritus director of innovation and resident technology.

She said staying in touch with family and friends is considered the most important factor in having a high quality of life by seniors responding to a 2013 survey by the National Council on Aging.

"We knew that if we could develop a senior-friendly communications app, it would make a positive difference for our residents and for their families," she said.

Technology in itself does not daunt seniors.

"It's that they don't need the complexity that comes with so many tech products," Baik said. According to the National Council on Aging survey, a third of seniors say not understanding how to use technology is a barrier to adopting it.

Because simplicity is so important, My Emeritus was designed for the iPad, the first such senior living industry app to be built purposely for that device. "We wanted to leverage the Apple experience, with its ease-of-use and beautiful interface," Baik said.

Key components of My Emeritus include social networking with a secure by-invitation feature that addresses seniors' privacy concerns, email, video chat and photo sharing.

"Everything is done by pictures," Baik said. "For example, to send a message to someone, you simply touch a picture of that person."

My Emeritus contains learning and entertainment features including virtual travel, which provides streams of 300 live webcams in Paris, London and other notable places around the globe. The app offers access to 10,000 classic films and its "Virtual Bingo" tool enables them to play with residents at other Emeritus communities. A "Window Inside" feature provides information on activities and events at Emeritus Oak Tree Village and allows the seniors to RSVP through the app.

Emeritus at Oak Tree Village has purchased a set of iPads for residents to use for free on a check-out system and has installed wireless internet throughout the community. It has also built the ME Café, an internet lounge with easy wheelchair and walker access and comfortable furnishings. There, residents can access the app in the company of others, either by using the iPads or two touchscreen desktop computers with large keyboards. Additionally, Emeritus at Oak Tree Village has installed a free-standing kiosk that tells residents if they have received electronic messages and offers community-related information.

Emeritus Senior Living expects to expand the technology program to more of its communities next year.

"There has been tremendous excitement about this among the residents of our community," said Jeana Klenc, Emeritus at Oak Tree Village executive director. "Their reaction as they learn to use the My Emeritus app and then begin to receive and send family messages, see videos and photos of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and become further connected to the greater community is very moving."