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High Tech, High Touch: How Two Wisconsin Communities are Changing the Way We Age

Wisconsin—When we talk about helping seniors age in place or stay connected in their communities, we usually talk *only* about technology. One program is about to revolutionize that model: **Connected Aging Communities**, a groundbreaking new initiative that’s using a unique “high tech, high touch” holistic approach to enable aging residents to live independently at home. “We know that *just* providing technology isn’t the answer,” explained Gail Huycke, UW-Extension Broadband & E-Commerce Education Center Outreach Specialist. “We need community and human interactions to support its use.”

Pilot communities Manitowish Waters (Vilas County, WI) and Park Falls (Price County, WI) are developing collaborative projects to improve social infrastructures, help older adults adopt technology, and ensure independent living by elderly residents in their communities.

“The Connected Aging Communities project is great example of using technology and private/public partnerships to enhance what we call at AARP the ‘livability’ of a community,” explains Sam Wilson, AARP State Director and project Advisory Board member. “By making a community livable, we mean the robustness of support in place to enhance residents’ personal fulfillment throughout life’s many stages. In the case of both Manitowish Waters and Park Falls, there is an understanding and commitment to build a digital support structure that connects their workforce to the global economy, creates interconnectivity with critical services like health care for older adults, and builds intergenerational cooperation and learning that strengthens the fabric of their communities. We at AARP applaud this innovative approach to both community and economic development and see it as a transformative model for others to follow.”

Senator Tom Tiffany agrees, noting that “Internet has become a part of all of our daily lives. It connects us from the workplace to the hospital or pharmacy. It even allows us to connect with our friends and families that can sometimes be hundreds of miles apart.” Building on this point, Chris Meyer, Director of Virtual Care for Marshfield Clinic Health System, noted that “declining health and chronic illness are two of the main reasons seniors need to leave the comfort of living in their home. Using technology to deliver healthcare directly to the patient, we can help seniors stay in their homes longer, increase the quality of their care through remote patient monitoring, provide peace of mind for loved ones and easier access to doctors for the patient and their care givers. This is possible with access to reliable high-speed internet access in the patients’ home.” Senator Tiffany and Chris Meyers both sit on the project Advisory Board, comprised of leaders in the fields of telecommunications, economic development, rural healthcare and aging.

This project is funded by Bader Philanthropies with [UW-Extension Broadband & E-Commerce Education Center](#) supporting local teams in each pilot community. The projects will run through 2018. For more on each community project see the following page.

About the Projects: Manitowish Waters (Vilas County)

"The strength of this program will come from the collaboration and commitment of local businesses, organizations and volunteers. Our small community is in a strategic planning phase making this the ideal time to create new, sustainable programming to fill the needs of our aging residents." Elizabeth Gering, Community Development Director, Town of Manitowish Waters and community project point person.

- The Manitowish Waters Intergenerational Technology Education Program is a multifaceted approach to getting the community's aging community connected to the internet.
- While there is now widely expanded broadband access across the community, there are still many people who do not have the skills and/or support to build confidence in using online resources that will help with day to day life such as social media, communication with their families, shopping, and medical technology.
- Youth have become the champions of the technology world as they have been brought up using it at home, school and with their friends. Youth and seniors are the perfect match for our program as they make up two of the largest demographics in our area.
- The program is a partnership between the Town of Manitowish Waters, North Lakeland School, Frank B. Koller Memorial Library, and a dedicated group of volunteers.
- North Lakeland School serves families from at least four different communities in Vilas County, making it possible to reach people beyond the borders of Manitowish Waters.
- The program will include a series of classes, activities, and organized events that will teach aging adults how they can use the internet to their advantage. Topics will include social media, ways to communicate with their families, telemedicine, cyber security, and how seniors can use technology to connect with others in the community. Class leaders will be a mix of North Lakeland School students, professionals, and volunteers who are qualified to cover specific topics.
- Classes, activities, and events will be held at North Lakeland School, Frank B. Koller Memorial Library, and the Manitowish Waters Community Center.

About the Projects: Park Falls, Price County

"Price County is one of the fastest aging counties in Wisconsin. As our community ages, our seniors are becoming increasingly isolated and lost in a world where technology is becoming the only solution for many of their needs. Our 'University of Independence Through the Internet' program will help us discover key obstacles keeping seniors from utilizing internet based solutions for all aspects of their lives. This program connects generations to help each other." Thomas Kaster, Director of Quality and Financial Oversight, Flambeau Hospital and community project point person.

- Development of a "University of the Independence through the Internet" program: two day-long workshops designed to educate, prepare and train community members ages 60 and older on the use of internet solutions to maintain independent, healthy, socially connected lives.

- Scholarships for a technology mentorship program will be announced during each workshop. Forty individuals will receive a tablet device and be paired with a local technology mentor. The mentor and mentee will be tasked with completing a list of social, entertainment and healthcare related tasks to complete using a provided tablet device. Although the main Connecting Aging Communities project is a long term, multi-year program, this project will provide the essential launching point for the journey.
- This project is targeting the senior community, but will engage children, grandchildren and younger volunteers throughout Price County.
- Key points of connectivity for senior well-being in this project include: social connection and overall wellbeing (access to family, friends, community organizations and nutrition solutions); health care connections (telehealth visits, specialty care telehealth, tele-pharmacy, tele-monitoring); financial connections (banking, Social Security and insurance online solutions).
- With the leadership of Flambeau Hospital, the assembled Price County Connecting Aging Communities Coalition has a core steering committee of seven individuals representing: Flambeau Hospital, Marshfield Clinic, Price County Health and Human Services, Price County Telephone Company (PCTC), and Northcentral Technical College. The steering committee is developing the short and long-term vision and seeking funding for programs.
- In addition to the steering committee, the coalition has engaged with: Park Falls (Chequamegon) and Phillips School Districts, local churches, local Veteran Services and local Libraries, key resources for outreach, guidance and volunteers. This larger group is the eyes and ears in the community and is helping build the critical mass of participants and volunteers needed to be successful. Many of these organizations already have programs for seniors and have extensive experience engaging our target group.

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