

News Release

Oakland County, American House pilot program successfully connects seniors to their families during pandemic with Amazon devices

July 12, 2021, OAKLAND COUNTY, MI. – The Oakland Together Lifeline Pilot Program is making a difference in the lives of some of Oakland County’s most vulnerable residents. The program, which the Board of Commissioners launched in partnership with American House, the county’s information technology department and the Area Agency on Aging 1-B (AAA 1-B), has paired senior residents with Amazon Echo Show devices to help them see and speak with those who may not be able to visit. Since its start, more than 60 residents have received devices and training to use them for a variety of tasks.

“It’s been amazing to see the improvements that these devices have helped bring to seniors who have had limited contact with their families,” Oakland County Commissioner **Kristen Nelson** (D-Waterford) said. “Even though keeping social distance has helped keep families physically healthy, our mental health suffers when we can’t be around those we love. This program was designed to help ease those effects, and so many of us developing the program, including myself, have even applied the concept with our own families.”

The program began with ideas from the Oakland County Task Force on COVID-19 Impact on Seniors’ Social Isolation, Loneliness and Health, which was formed in the spring of 2020 to help vulnerable adults through the pandemic. Nelson, who chaired the taskforce, then engaged additional organizations to determine how technology could keep seniors connected to their loved ones even if they are unable to frequently visit each other in person.

Oakland County and American House used federal CARES Act funding to purchase 100 Amazon Echo Show devices in late 2020. Forty-seven residents at two American House communities in both Rochester Hills and Troy volunteered to receive the device and training on how to use it. Because many senior communities limited or did not allow visitors during the pandemic, older adults have been uniquely vulnerable and more isolated from their friends and families than other populations. American House is considering extending the pilot program to additional facilities in Oakland County.

Joanne Ames is a resident at American House's Rochester Hills community. She explained that she wanted to participate in the program because it was a good opportunity, and she looks forward to learning new ways to use the device. Currently she uses it to set reminders, listen to weather reports, listen to her favorite music, find her TV schedule and speak with friends and family more easily.

"My hearing is very bad," Ames said. "Having phone calls where I can see their face and read their lips with no mask is a blessing."

Ames is not the only resident to have found these devices helpful. A survey of initial participants, which was made possible in part due to the Michigan Health Fund, found that 50 percent reported a decrease in isolation from friends and family outside of the residence.

"We are grateful for the support of the Michigan Health Fund to evaluate and share the impact of this program with senior housing and care providers," Jim McGuire, director of research, policy development and advocacy at AAA 1-B, said. "The positive findings suggest all senior housing operators should incorporate Alexa devices into their social programming for residents."

This June, the Oakland Together Lifeline Program received a 2021 National Association of Counties Achievement Award in the Information Technology category.

For more information about the BOC, please visit www.oakgov.com/boc or call 248-858-0100.

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