

# Technologies to connect socially:

Seven profiles of products, programs and providers



**As people increasingly recognize the importance of social connections to older-adult health and well-being, providers focus their efforts on helping individuals stay involved with their families, friends and communities**

*by Tammy Ditmore*

In 1998, Jack York's friend Leslie Sweeney talked him into donating computers to an assisted-living community in California. There, York was startled to discover how "disconnected and lonely" the residents were and disheartened because he knew conventional technology couldn't

help much. So Leslie, Jack and his brother Tom launched It's Never 2 Late (iN2L) in 1999 with the idea that people deserve interaction no matter how old they are.

York says they spent a decade or so trying to "figure out what we were doing." Eventually, iN2L learned how to integrate hardware, software, videos, music and personal components into an adaptive computer system now used in more than 2,500 senior living communities in the United States and other countries. The key to iN2L's success, according to York, is that the system "really has noth-

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*With 'step-through' frames for easy mounts and dismounts, EVELO electric bikes feature intelligent pedal assist and lithium battery packs that power riders as far as 60 miles on a single charge. Image courtesy of EVELO Electric Bicycle Company*

ing to do with aging; it has to do with individuals. The magic isn't the tech—it's the human need to stay connected. It's finding what works. People want to be connected to what's meaningful for them no matter how old they are."

As social connections are increasingly recognized as vital to older-adult health and well-being<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup> (see the sidebar on the impacts of social isolation and loneliness on page 61), more organizations and individuals are "finding what works" to help individuals stay engaged with life and connected to families, friends and communities. Technology is already moving towards solutions that support a more inclusive world. This article offers a quick glimpse at just a few products, programs and providers.

## **EVELO**

Although most current technological developments seem to involve computers, the EVELO Electric Bicycle Company is proving that older adults don't always need keyboards to enrich social con-

nections. Boris Mordkovich, cofounder and president of EVELO, says 80–90% of his customers are riders in their 50s, 60s and 70s who see the electric bikes as "very much a social thing." With power-on-demand technology that lets riders choose varying degrees of pedal assistance, the EVELO bike allows users to keep up with friends and family even on challenging rides. It can also help them increase fitness levels while getting back to an activity they love.

"A lot of our customers start off using the motor 90% of the time and pedaling only 10%, but as they get in better shape, they start pedaling more and more," Mordkovich explains. EVELO's bikes are built with a combination of new and old technology, he says, all with the goal of making the bike easy to ride and easy to maintain.

Mordkovich did not set out to build a bike for older riders, but when he recognized how many were buying the EVELO, he introduced an easy-to-

mount "step-through" bike frame, more comfortable seats and low center of gravity so riders could more easily reach the ground. The company also changed its marketing and customer service options, even setting up an "Ambassador Program" that rewards riders who introduce the bike to others. "Now everything we do, from bike design, to marketing, to images used are directed to the 50+ market," he says.

Most of EVELO's customers live independently but a "healthy number" are in senior living communities, Mordkovich reveals. The bike allows them extra freedom wherever they live. He comments, "We're seeing people going out more frequently with their spouse, their kids, their friends. It allows them to get back to activities they enjoyed before."

## **Generation to Generation**

While some tech products aim to strengthen family connections, the Generation to Generation (Gen2Gen) campaign through Encore.org aims to get older adults involved in meaningful community projects that benefit young people. "Generations are meant to be together," states Aaron Larsen, digital engagement manager for Gen2Gen. "When we're together, each side is growing," he says. Gen2Gen wants to demonstrate how "tech can be used to connect the generations."

The campaign is a part of Encore.org, an organization founded in 1998 to help adults 50 and older find meaningful jobs or volunteer positions—an "encore." Launched in November 2016 as a five-year commitment, Gen2Gen aims to mobilize a million adults to connect with young people in challenging circumstances. Participating in such efforts can help older adults thrive in all seven dimensions of wellness: emotional, environmental, intellectual/cognitive,

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*From 70" touch screen systems to iN2L Focus tablets, It's Never 2 Late systems help older adults easily engage with content and connect with loved ones, staff and each other. Image courtesy of It's Never 2 Late*

physical, professional/vocational, social and spiritual.

The technology and communication tools being used by Gen2Gen are not new, Larsen acknowledges, but they are being used in innovative ways to draw generations together. For example, 2017 summer campaigns to help provide kids with education, food, jobs and recreation kicked off with a webinar watched live by groups in multiple locations. The webinar was then loaded on the Encore.org website, where it could be viewed by anyone interested in the summer campaigns.

Visitors to the Gen2Gen webpage were encouraged to "Accept This Challenge"

in one of the four target areas by clicking on a link, which led to ideas about tackling particular problems or getting involved with local efforts. "What's really fascinating about the tech we're using," Larsen says, "is that we're able to provide tailored info based on which talent or which area people choose to be involved in."

In the fall, the Gen2Gen campaign will turn its focus toward advancing childhood literacy. Using digital tools on the Gen2Gen website, supporters will have the opportunity to search for volunteer activities in their local area, download helpful guides, and contribute to the cause.

To promote interaction and sharing, a Generation to Generation Facebook page and a "Gen2Gen Champions Facebook Group" have been created so active campaign supporters can communicate on a peer-to-peer basis. There is also the "Gen2Gen Toolbox Group" for practitioners. Larsen sees Facebook as a place for supporters of Gen2Gen, younger and older, to connect and interact. Facebook groups, online webinars, digital campaigns and other technology-based tools can help older adults "invest in something meaningful and something that results in social renewal. That is what will help us make an impact that lasts beyond our years," Larsen comments. "It's the idea of legacy."

## **iN2L**

At iN2L, person-centered technology is the focus of systems designed to enable people of all abilities "to use the computer pleurably." President and Cofounder Jack York points to a video clip that shows two women standing before a large screen; one drags pieces of a virtual jigsaw puzzle with her finger, encouraging the other to join her. It is obvious that the women are enjoying the activity; less obvious is that both are in advanced stages of dementia.

## **Mark your calendar**

Brookdale's Carol Cummings will take part as a presenter in the cognitive wellness preconference day on October 11 at the ICAA Conference 2017, in Orlando, Florida. The day's focus is "The ROI of brain health." To learn more about the conference or to register, visit <http://icaa.cc/conferenceandevents/overview.htm>.

The women are engaged with iN2L's picture-based interface, which lets users "touch" their way to engaging, ability-appropriate content. People who have never used a computer can quickly manipulate iN2L to connect with family and friends, play games or enjoy music and videos. The scalable system can be used in almost any setting, according to York. However, its most "dramatic application" has been in memory care programs, where the system's overarching goal is "just making a person's life better. A person far down the dementia path—it's unreasonable to say you're going to dramatically improve their cognition, but you can dramatically improve their day," he states.

The iN2L system can be used in groups and also customized for individuals. The system's flight simulator will likely entertain a former pilot, while a Google Earth exploration of neighborhoods can fascinate individuals and groups alike. A "My Page" section offers easy access to personalized content, including favorite music, movies, games, or videos of the grandkids.

Studies have shown that iN2L users exhibit improved moods and need fewer psychotropic drugs.<sup>6,7,8</sup> Such success stories explain why iN2L has close to a 100% retention rate in senior living communities and why Brookdale Senior Liv-

ing has included it in more than 700 of its communities, mostly memory care.

“We have over 4,000 pieces of content on our system, and when staff members really dig into that content to find out what each person wants to use, that’s when the system is most effective,” York says. “Before sedating someone, give them the music they want, a priest saying the rosary, a grandson sending a video to his grandmother.”

### **iPads and Apple TV at Brookdale**

While iN2L is employed in hundreds of Brookdale’s memory-care communities, the senior housing provider makes use of iPads and Apple TV in its independent- and assisted-living settings. Carol Cummings, RN, senior director of Optimum Life engagement and innovation, notes that every community has at least one such device and staff have been trained to use them for engagement purposes.

### **Social isolation and loneliness: How they impact health and well-being**

There are numerous physical and mental health risks linked to social isolation and loneliness in older adults. Among the associated health impacts are:<sup>1,2,3</sup>

- increased risk of all-cause mortality
- shorter life spans
- mobility limitations
- chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure
- higher rates of heart disease
- weakened immune system
- depression and anxiety
- dementia, including Alzheimer’s disease
- admissions to nursing homes/communities

“The iPad is a simple tool, and our residents are learning to use them,” Cummings says. Brookdale turned to the Apple products in part because they are being used by residents’ families, she explains, so training in those devices can help connect generations. (In 2015, a Brookdale-supported study looked into social technology use and its impact on older-adult health and well-being; see the sidebar on page 65 to learn more.)

The tablets can be used in one-on-one situations and group settings, where content is likely to be mirrored on the Apple television screen. Residents can play games, watch TED Talks [short videos featuring expert speakers], or find something that interests them among the millions of available apps. Cummings explains how a resident director reached out to one man who had declared the iPad was “not for me.” Knowing the man was a veteran, the director called up the Arlington National Cemetery app and “visited” the gravesite of a friend who had died in battle. It was “a powerful, personalized experience for this man,” Cummings says.

Almost all residents have been able to take advantage of the FaceTime technology, engaging in video conversations and also watching family weddings, funerals and birthday parties, according to Cummings. FaceTime even allowed one woman to see her great-grandchild just 15 minutes after the baby was born.

Brookdale offers classes to help residents learn to use iPads, encouraging them to go beyond the basics. An upcoming iPad film festival will feature five-minute videos created in Brookdale communities nationwide to “celebrate aging.” Residents, who are being taught how to use Apple’s iMovie video-editing suite and manipulate lighting as well as other programs, are competing to be one of 12 finalists chosen to attend the awards ceremony in Nashville, Tennessee, in October. Through both the competition



*Connected Living’s mobile app gives older adults and their families a means to connect privately. Image courtesy of Connected Living*

and the film content, Brookdale hopes to “change the perceptions of aging and change the stereotype of aging,” Cummings concludes.

### **Connected Living**

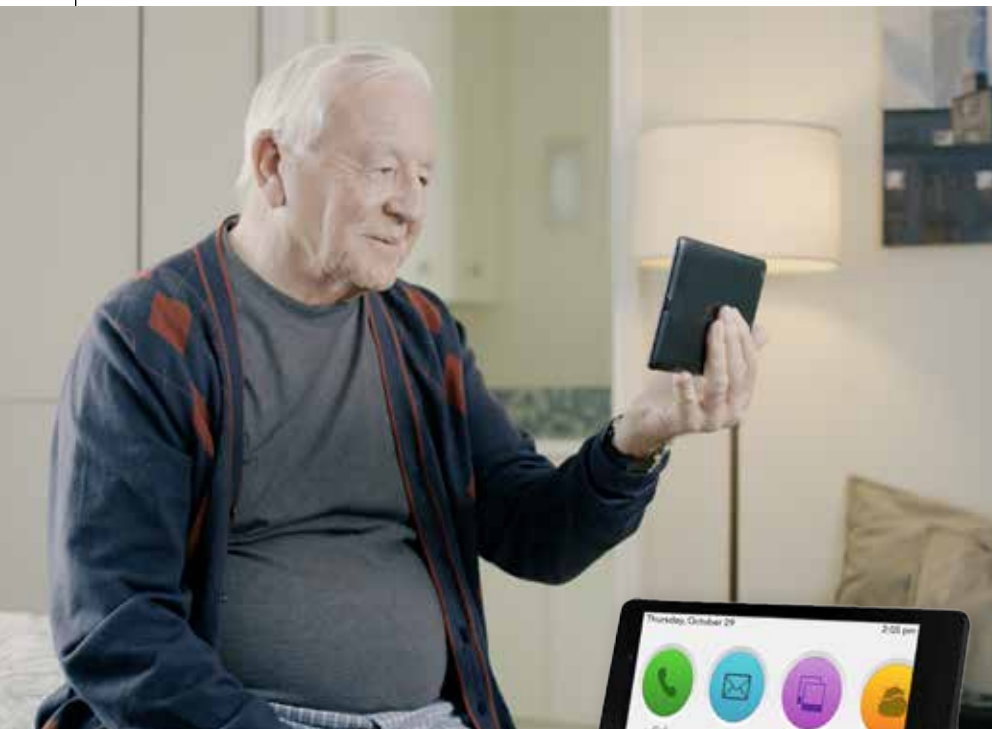
Improving the lives of older adults by enabling and enhancing connections is the central mission of Connected Living (CL) because too many people are aging “completely out of the conversation,” according to CEO Sarah Hoit. Cultivating and improving communication is at the heart of both CL’s web-based ecosystem for senior living communities and its recently released app for families in any living situation.

CL has partnered with Sodexo to bring “better services, engagement and quality of life” to older adults “wherever they live.” The partnership helps introduce the CL ecosystem into many more senior communities, where staff can use the system to disseminate information—menus, calendars, photos, alerts and more—from one entry point. In addition, the program can provide digital

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*Older adults advised grandPad on the development of its wireless tablet. Featuring a simple interface, the device comes already loaded with family contacts and photos. Image courtesy of grandPad*

signage, in-house TV and a mobile app for residents. The CL mobile app can also provide a “window in” for family members, who can access community information and receive photos, updates and alerts about loved ones.

Hoit notes that CL’s recently released mobile app, available as a free download for Apple and Android devices, is designed for “any family in the United States who is trying to connect with a small, private group.” Through the app, family members can place voice or video calls and share pictures, videos and messages. Hoit says users enjoy having a place to privately connect: Parents feel safe posting pictures of babies; teens don’t worry that peers will see messages to their grandparents; older adults enjoy having family pictures in one place.

But the CL app is far more than a digital gathering place. “We are not trying to re-create Facebook,” Hoit stresses. “Connected Living is a small world. It’s a place on the planet where 14-year-olds and Mom and Dad can all be safe.” The app can provide alerts if a particular user has been inactive for a certain number of hours or notify users when a connection arrives at specified locations—a parent at a doctor’s visit or a child at school, for example. The app also allows users to create a “geofence,” pinning a location on a map to another user and then receiving alerts if the user leaves that area. For a monthly fee, users can select an upgrade that arranges services such as ride-sharing or concierge services.

The mobile app can be used in conjunction with CL’s programs in senior com-

munities or entirely on its own. Hoit says the company’s products aim to “privately connect families. It doesn’t matter where you are aging; we have a product that connects you to your family and provides peace of mind.”

## **grandPad**

The ability to privately connect families is also a hallmark of another product, the grandPad, a “senior-first” tablet introduced in 2015. Kerry Burnight, PhD, the company’s chief gerontologist, says the “frustration free” tablet was designed to meet the needs and preferences of older adults, with advisors ages 75–114 consulted “at every decision point.”

The wireless tablet, which is connected online via 4G LTE connectivity, requires no Wi-Fi or passwords, turns on when the cover is opened, sports an intuitive and easy-to-see interface, includes front-facing speakers, and is recharged directly from a cradle. “A 90-year-old can open the box and start enjoying grandPad in 90 seconds,” Burnight writes in an email.

Because the unit comes preloaded with contact information and photos of loved ones, grandPad users can instantly connect through video calls or emails and share photos, music, games and news with family members who download a smartphone app to make the grandPad connection. Only those in the “circle of trust” can access the grandPad user, which eliminates unwanted solicitations and potential cyber predators, Burnight notes. A monthly fee for the device covers hardware, software, setup, device insurance and “white glove” customer service.

According to Burnight, typical grandPad users are 75 and older. Several home healthcare firms, including Comfort Keepers and Alta Home Care, have part-

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nered with grandPad to offer the tablets to their clients.<sup>9,10</sup>

Ken McCord, vice president of operations services for CK Franchising/Comfort Keepers, says the devices have been popular with Comfort Keeper clients because they are simple to operate and provide direct connection to family. Although grandPad users can play games

and music and engage in other solo activities, McCord believes its real value lies in enhancing connections. “The technology has little value to the older adult if family is not using it with them,” he says.

The device can also help create a richer experience between users and caregivers, who can see clients’ family pictures and stories, play games with them on the tablet, or find favorite music from the many tracks available with the grandPad subscription. “We’ve seen older adults come alive and stand up and want to dance to their favorite music,” McCord states. In addition, the tablets provide Comfort Keepers, which is part of the Sodexo family, an effective operations tool because caregivers use them to record notes about client visits. The notes can also be seen by family members in a “family room portal,” he states.

Comfort Keepers began offering the grandPads as an added service in October 2016, and between 1,500 and 2,000 clients were using them by the middle of 2017, according to McCord. He predicts that all the company’s 600 US territories will have the devices available by the end of this year.

According to Burnight, grandPad’s mission to improve the lives of older adults “aligns perfectly” with the goals of Comfort Keepers and similar home healthcare services. Family members, she writes, are looking for caregivers “who not only provide excellent, affordable care, but who also help address the suffering and illness caused by loneliness.”

## **LifePod**

The LifePod provides some of the same functions found in the grandPad and Connected Living apps, but it is built on a voice-controlled system. Based on the Amazon Alexa delivery system, the LifePod is a virtual caregiver and digital assistant, says Dennis Fontaine, CEO of Transcendent Technologies. Users “do

what they’ve been doing most of their lives: Have a conversation.”

The LifePod includes many utilitarian components, but Fontaine believes “its best feature is that it offers companionship.” He observes that “people who are in their 80s ... want to interact; they want their independence.”

The LifePod, currently in a beta phase, will make it easier for users to quickly get in touch with loved ones or join group activities in a residential community even when they can’t leave their rooms. In addition, a social network is being built into the device that will allow users to talk to other people with the same units, Fontaine notes. “Mom can say, ‘I’m lonely; let me talk to someone,’ and LifePod will randomly connect them with other people who are online in this mode at the same time. It could be someone in Canada or someone across the hall,” he says.

The LifePod can be programmed to perform daily routines, such as turn on lights and open blinds, remind users to take medicine, play music or read audiobooks. Because the device can be programmed remotely, a daughter in California could set up daily routines on her mother’s unit in Texas or tell it to play her mother’s favorite song at bedtime. The unit will also listen for signs of falls or other distress and make contact with preselected users—like “Life Alert but with no buttons or bracelets,” mentions Fontaine.

Besides performing programmed routines, the LifePod will respond to a user’s voice commands, such as “Call my daughter” or “Play Elvis Presley.” And unlike the Alexa, the LifePod allows users to choose their own “wake” word to command the machine. LifePod runs from one small box that can be mounted on a wall or placed on a shelf, connects by Wi-Fi, uses the Amazon cloud and Alexa voice service, and includes multiple layers of security.

## **Resources**

### *Internet*

**Brookdale Senior Living, Inc.**  
[www.brookdale.com](http://www.brookdale.com)

**CK Franchising/Comfort Keepers**  
[www.comfortkeepers.com](http://www.comfortkeepers.com)

**Connected Living, Inc.**  
[www.connectedliving.com](http://www.connectedliving.com)

**EVELO Electric Bicycles**  
[www.evelo.com](http://www.evelo.com)

**Generation to Generation at Encore.org**  
[www.generationtogeneration.org](http://www.generationtogeneration.org)

**GrandPad**  
[www.grandpad.net](http://www.grandpad.net)

**It’s Never 2 Late (iN2L)**  
<http://in2l.com>

**Transcendent Technologies LifePod**  
[www.lifepodnet.com](http://www.lifepodnet.com)

### *Multimedia*

Westminster-Canterbury on Chesapeake Bay. The Birdsong Initiative videos and NPR interview audio file. Available at [www.wcbay.com/birdsong](http://www.wcbay.com/birdsong)

Fontaine expects the product to be released widely by the beginning of 2018 and to be offered on a monthly subscription basis. He and a team of LifePod developers spent about six months interacting with older adults in various living arrangements to make sure the product would give “the user something they really want,” he says. “It gives peace of mind to family members and caregivers and it’s helpful to the user themselves. Very helpful.”

### Looking ahead

As with all tech markets, the offerings for older adults continue to grow and adapt, and many new developments are on the horizon. Experts expect that robots will be assisting older adults in the next decade or so; in fact, robotic pets are already on the market [Ed. A news story about a therapeutic robotic seal appears on page 13]. IN2L’s Jack York and Brookdale’s Carol Cummings both predict that virtual reality will soon be making a splash in this demographic, and several developers are experimenting with optimizing ride-sharing and other on-demand services for older adults.

Many of the individuals and organizations involved in these efforts would agree with Ken McCord, the CK Franchising/Comfort Keepers vice president, who states, “We’re ... committed to the highest quality of life achievable for older adults. And we’re recognizing that technology can help us achieve that outcome.”

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### Technology to connect: Research suggests quality-of-life benefits for older users

In the 2015 “Rewiring Aging” study facilitated by Brookdale, 58% of 445 surveyed adults who were ages 80 and older believed technology helped them stay socially connected.<sup>1</sup> Many also found technology frustrating and difficult to learn.<sup>1</sup>

Discussing the study results, lead author Tamara Sims, a research analyst at Stanford Center on Longevity, noted the benefits associated when people over 80 *did* use technology to connect with others.<sup>5</sup> Self-reported measures of well-being included higher life satisfaction, lower loneliness, better health and greater likelihood of attaining life goals.<sup>1,4</sup>

Sims stressed that it was not possible to say this technology use caused improvements in well-being in adults 80 and older. “But our findings are suggestive of a viable pathway,” she said, “and may help to inform longitudinal interventions.”<sup>5</sup>