

By Shauna Steigerwald

Aging in cyberspace

Older adults can adopt, benefit from newer tech

It is difficult to say which is growing faster: the average age of our population or the rate of advancements in technology that many of us use every day. What's certain is that with one in six people in the United States age 65 and up (per 2020 U.S. Census Bureau data), older populations and those who serve them must make use of those advancements.

To get an idea of how seniors and technology intersect in our region, we spoke with experts from five organizations serving older adults. Their consensus is that, although seniors face challenges in accessing and using technology, those advancements are already improving quality of life for those they serve – and more opportunities lie ahead.

Panelists

- **Jim Bowersox**, chief operating officer, Life Enriching Communities
- **Megan Bradford**, vice president of middle market and ministry, Episcopal Retirement Services
- **Betsy Eiserman**, assistive technology and accessibility manager, Easterseals Redwood
- **Jai'La Nored**, senior innovation designer, Council on Aging
- **Breanna Williams**, programs manager, Meals on Wheels Southwest OH & Northern KY

Seniors & tech: stereotypes vs. reality

Our panelists have served seniors for varying lengths of time, but they've all seen significant changes in technology. In their experience, stereotypes about seniors' lack of interest in technology still exist, but they're mostly untrue. Sometimes it's just a matter of showing older adults how to use tech – and how they'll benefit.

Megan Bradford: The stereotype is always that “older adults don't understand technology; they don't want to understand technology. It's too complicated; don't even try.” I've never found that to be true ... I would be hard-pressed to find a resident ... really in any of our communities that doesn't have a cellphone. And I would say probably about 75% of them have a (smartphone) of some sort.

Jai'La Nored: If you're willing to show older adults how to do the thing, they will do the thing. ... Sometimes it just takes building that usefulness or building that tool up to an older adult so it can be their first response. The industry coins the term “tech native versus tech adopter.” Older adults are

mostly tech adopters, and adopt and assimilate tech use in various different stages based on the generation they're coming from. So we definitely passed the tipping point of, “Oh, older adults don't want technology or they want to throw it away or they're not wanting to use it.” They have already said, “We're going to integrate this into our lives.”

Breanna Williams: We work with a wide range of demographics. Maybe some folks that are between the ages of 50 to 75, they've become already quite familiar with certain devices. And then you have those that are maybe 75-plus that just kind of got through life just fine without using cellphones and tablets. They might just need to be shown how that device can benefit them or improve their life.

Betsy Eiserman: In just four years, (there is a) difference between the development of technology that's available and used with older adults. Developers didn't use to include individuals who are older in any development of the technology ... Afterwards, they would try to come up with a fix to meet that gap. Now we're seeing more research and development going into “How can this work for older adults?” – which is leading to some more successful technologies ... that are a little easier, more intuitive to use, simpler and don't rely on a huge cognitive load.

Support is critical

Even when older adults are eager to try new technology, they may face challenges in accessing and using it, our panelists said. These range from fear of the unknown to lack of skills to safety in a realm where scams and fraud can (and do) happen. Support from organizations and/or family can be critical.

Williams: (With) fear of the unknown, once they actually get a device and they dive in and learn some of the basic skills ... they learn something new and then they want to learn more. But it's exposing them to that world in the first place, which might be totally new and make them a little bit fearful at first.

Nored: Tech literacy is a huge deficit that I think we've all felt in various spaces. The one that comes to mind is the beginning of the pandemic (with Zoom). ... We experienced a lot of our caregivers trying to figure out how to navigate through that space. But tech doesn't mean the same thing



Jim Bowersox



Megan Bradford



Betsy Eiserman



Jai'La Nored



Breanna Williams



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– Jai'La Nored, senior innovation designer, Council on Aging

to everybody. And because tech is a tool, not everybody uses that tool the same. So one of the biggest barriers, just because we haven't put the aging population in the forefront, is trying to catch up to everybody else with providing the tools to expand that literacy.

I would say the other barrier is the IT support that is the family member. ... As much hand-holding or as many resources or as many guides as we design, at the end of the day, the daughter becomes the IT support. And so our technology is only as good as her understanding when it comes to that older adult using it.

Eiserman: Because it's going to take multiple repetitions and patience, and it's very easy for an older adult to become overwhelmed and then just abandon the device and say, "It is not worth it. I can't do this." ... There have to be lots and lots of supports, and even outside of the family.

Jim Bowersox: We've allocated so much more of our human resources to catering to the needs of the residents as it relates to technology. We have concierge hospitality service as part of the hospitality area on each of our campuses, and they spend most of their time just helping the residents use the technology they have and expanding their knowledge.

(We also need to be) educating not only on using the technology, but also what not to do with it and getting into the cybersecurity thing and ... the vulnerability of the older adults (who are) more

susceptible to those scams ... Helping the residents and their families through those situations is a really big challenge for us.

Nored: (We) deal with a lot of questions around security because, as a millennial, it doesn't mean anything to me to put my Social Security number into my bank app to get a credit card, but to an older adult that's like, "Why are you giving your life away?" The comfortability there is different.

Challenges exacerbated

For older adults experiencing disability, those with lower incomes or those living in more rural areas, challenges can be exacerbated. These organizations have been working to address that, and they say the COVID-19 pandemic propelled progress.

Nored: If you live in some of our rural counties, even in some parts as close as Butler County or Clermont County, there are spaces where you can't really depend on the internet. You are just now catching onto the wave of 5G ... Any person feeling the effects of poverty or location ... (they) are going to have a harder time using technology.

Eiserman: Because we work with individuals with intellectual disabilities, they are on limited incomes, usually just based on Social Security. So we've become very creative in finding funding sources through local nonprofits, charity organizations, and every state has (the) Assistive Technology Act. ... We are charged with providing alternative funding sources for individuals.

Nored: Coming through the pandemic, there was a lot of funding that came about because we had to depend on technology so much. I think we can attribute, as dark as that time was, a lot of the growth and adoption and understanding of technology to that point in time. We were finally able to, as nonprofits, not just use that funding for the bare minimum of



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our mission, but we were able to go deeper with our mission and fund things like, “Oh, let me give a senior a tablet” or “Let me develop a process so that people can go out in the community and help somebody learn how to do their ‘ClickList’ so they can get their groceries or so that they can have somebody pick them up to take them to the doctor.”

At Meals on Wheels, Digital Connect provides tech support, tablets and internet access to Hamilton County residents who qualify. They also get access to online health, wellness and social programming; telehealth appointments; worship services; and tasks such as ordering groceries. The organization is working with the Northern Kentucky Area Development District to expand the program and provide Claris Companion Tablets to home-delivered meal recipients and rural senior centers across the river.

Williams: It does track everything that is done on the tablet at a high level. So it will not capture that individual’s personal information that they put into the tablet, but it will let us know how often are those individuals using the tablets to access telehealth or to do grocery ordering or to engage in those virtual opportunities. Then it gives us that data that we can use to hopefully show future supporters or funders the benefits of providing these devices to older adults.

Easterseals Redwood has an Assistive Technology Resource Center in Fort Mitchell and will open a similar center in Walnut Hills this summer.

Eiserman: Our whole goal is to have a repertoire of technology devices that individuals can borrow without charge ... for 30 days. We will train them how to use it. They can call every single day if they need support with how to use something before putting out the money to purchase, because these technologies are so expensive. We are community libraries; we are open to everyone. You don’t have to have an intellectual disability; you don’t have to have any disability. You can just come in and we will problem-solve and find you stuff to try.

Big strides in health monitoring

Despite the challenges our panelists highlighted, technology is aiding their work and improving seniors’ quality of life and ability to live more independently. Health monitoring, in particular, has made big strides.

Bowersox: Technology has emerged fairly recently whereby there’s passive monitoring in (residences) that is not a camera, so it’s not

invasive in that way. It actually runs by radar and AI, and the technology learns what the normal patterns are for the person, then interacts with their health record and ... detects changes in their health ... I think (it) will be part of our industry solution for tackling the labor issue, particularly on the nursing side.

We had a person who had a skin cancer issue. He had something removed from his head, and he was getting up in the middle of the night kind of messing with his wound. Then he’d fall, because he was tired. This was all detected with the system. And so after this pattern was detected (and it happened pretty quickly), (we made) a visit (to) the independent living apartment ... (He explained) what I just described, and we said, “Well, why don’t you let our clinic nurse dress your wound, then you’ll sleep and then you’ll feel better and then you won’t fall.” ... Once that interaction happened, well, then all the problems stopped.

Bradford: A lot of our residents (in) our communities have pendant systems that track you. You can press your pendant and it will give us a very small area of where you’re located on the campus to come find you for help. Of course, people who live at home don’t have that luxury, but they have things like Life Alert and just the latest and greatest of Apple Watches and devices that detect a fall, they detect an accident and it automatically calls 911 for you. The more we can encourage older adults who are aging in place in the broader community that don’t have the Continuing Care Retirement Communities oversight and support to adapt some of those technologies (the better). A smart watch ... can tell us your heart rate. It can tell us how much you’ve been up and moving that day, sleep patterns, lifeline, all that kind of stuff. I think that’s been huge.

Nored: Palarum is an Ohio-based company ... They develop socks, and those socks have sensors that track the gait and different pressures and different pressure points, and all of that goes back to a very interesting database that tells (the wearer’s) health professionals a lot about their progression and their decline and their improvements.

Bowersox: One of our mantras is we want to help our residents live their best lives ... A major cause of someone not living their best life is if they have a fall. Then if you unpack that a little bit more, it’s balance ... There’s this fairly new technology that’s out there that we happen to use at our campuses as well. It’s AI-driven, and you stand in front of a camera



Think about the power ... a simple tablet or a smartphone can provide someone ... who’s forced to be home for a while, who just wants to maybe have a connection with someone outside of the home.

– Breanna Williams, programs manager, Meals on Wheels Southwest OH & Northern KY

and it creates an avatar ... You go through these movements and it does all these things and diagnoses your vulnerability to not having good balance or falls. Then the physical therapist sees that, or the orthopedist sees that, and you can fix it.

‘Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation’

Beyond keeping tabs on their physical health, technology can also keep older adults connected with loved ones, particularly when they can’t be together in person. Considering our ‘Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation’ (described in a 2023 U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory), the impact of that connection can be significant.

Eiserman: Technology is essential for keeping the older population connected. Things that have come out of the pandemic (include) the absolute fear that older adults feel when COVID levels are up or RSV levels are up. They’re not going to leave their home as much. There’s a much stronger likelihood of social isolation, and by coming together by a tablet, social groups, they’re at least still interacting with people.

Nored: I think just the devices themselves are helping with socialization. But interesting enough, social media and older adults is not a topic that’s talked on a whole lot, but they are all over social media. I unfortunately have a TikTok addiction, and I see older adults using that as a way to build community, to share stories, to share recipes, to do all of these things.

Williams: Think about the power and what a simple tablet or a smartphone can provide someone who maybe just got discharged from the

hospital, who's forced to be home for a while, who just wants to maybe have a connection with someone outside of the home.

Technology can encourage more in-person socialization for seniors. Life Enriching Communities' online portal, created to take the place of bulletin boards and other paper announcements, is one example.

Bowersox: (It) does a lot in terms of just communicating what's going on around the campus. And it also allows communication between the residents – and importantly, the residents and us, LEC. And that's pretty critical to people's social lives, because their menus are there and all the events and programs are there ... We've noticed over time, it's certainly promoted greater socialization.

Another example is the Swipe 'N Dine program. It is designed to revitalize congregate meals for older adults after COVID-19, and Nored likens it to a credit system similar to those used for college meal plans. It gives seniors the opportunity to socialize over a restaurant-quality, nutritious meal. Meals on Wheels and Deupree Meals on Wheels (ERS) provide the service, and

both Williams and Bradford said they've been able to serve populations they weren't able to serve in the past.

Bradford: I just love that Council on Aging and the Meals on Wheels providers can partner together to broaden the reach to older adults that need this food, that need the community. Food brings people together.

Access to information, resources

Just as it has for the population at large, technology offers seniors better access to information than ever before.

Bradford: (If you) have something like an Alexa or even just Siri on your Apple devices, that's been such a game changer for our older adults. I don't have to boot up my computer and log in and dial up and remember my password. ... For anyone who is able to verbalize that or wants to learn something, having technology like a Siri or an Alexa just opens the world for folks.

Being able to share information more readily has also helped organizations get the word out about their services more efficiently. Nored and

Bowersox said seniors and their families are increasingly learning about the services they offer via their websites, rather than just through the mail or flyers of the past.

Nored: Just by improving things on our website, we've been able to streamline that process of getting somebody who needs help to the answer that we can provide.

Some organizations are going even further, developing apps for those who use their services.

Williams: We've launched an app that allows our recipients to track their delivery in real time. Traditionally, we offer an (eight-hour) window of delivery to all of our meal recipients ... which really limits that individual on the day of their delivery ... This app allows them to track in real time where their meal is, which promotes their freedom.

Nored: We actually launched, in 2022, our own application called AddnAide ... We partnered with a lot of people to bring it to life, and now we have hundreds of people who are able to go into AddnAide and find somebody who they can hire to do simple tasks in their home.



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What about AI?

While we've discussed how artificial intelligence is already aiding health monitoring and access to information, there is room for its use to grow in the senior sector – with caveats. And don't expect to see robots taking the place of human caregivers anytime soon.

Bradford: Initially my thought is, “Well, there’s no room for AI.” We’re caring for people. Nothing cares for a person better than another person. ... We’re not going to have AI or robots or things like that anytime in the near future that will replace the physical caregiving, and frankly the emotional connection, of being with someone in person ... But what can we adopt? What’s going to improve the quality of life for somebody? What’s going to open doors for them or allow them to live a little bit longer independently? ... As a provider, I have to remind myself to not hear things like AI and say, “Ah, that’s not for us,” because I do think there is a place in our industry for it.

Eiserman: You’re working on an algorithm-based standardization that’s not taking any individual differences into account. So any group or any population of people who are outside of whatever is considered the average, it’s not going to be as effective or maybe as appropriate or as safe as it will be for that middle-of-the-road average.

Nored: I had the opportunity to see a humanoid robot react using AI a couple of years ago ... She’s not going to be good enough to figure out and go through the root cause analysis around why the older adult’s upset

because their diet changed or those little things that really need the human touch.

Eiserman: The shortage of employees and support personnel is something that is here, and it’s probably here to stay. So if we can have a robot deliver food in a space and free up the actual people to interact with the adults and provide that good quality socialization, I’m all for it.

Bowersox: We had robots in three of our campuses just as a trial running food back and forth to the kitchen while the server stayed there with the residents. And just to be blunt, it didn’t work as well as we wanted it to.

Bradford: The reality is the robots that we have access to, I don’t know if it’s our industry or what, but you still have to have somebody there to troubleshoot it. ... Nothing replaces that direct interaction with that person. ... It’s the vacuuming, it’s the cleaning, it’s the delivery of things. What can we make more efficient, even our own time as people who are behind desks for most or part of their days? How can we make our time more efficient so that we have time to go interact with the people that we’re serving?

Better together

Throughout our discussion, the ideas of working together and learning from one another kept coming up. As organizations navigate all the technological changes sure to come, partnerships will be key.

Eiserman: You’re only as good as your list of resources. ... We need to have this



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collaboration. We need to know where to send someone or who to contact, and that way we’re just benefiting the senior population.

Bradford: None of our missions, I don’t think, are to be everything to everybody. So we have to lean on each other. ... I just think having this dialogue with like-minded individuals, but also like-minded in our organizations, is so beneficial. ■



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