

## Identifying solutions to embracing social connection as a value proposition

What can COVID-19 teach us about marketing Life Plan Communities?

Part Three

John Franklin | August 2020



### EXPERIENCE & TRUST

The world of senior living, senior care, and healthcare are in a constant state of change. That's why – over the past 30 years – organizations have turned to John Franklin for guidance and advice they can trust. As a writer and speaker, John continues to research and write about subjects he considers important to the senior living industry.

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### Challenges can help create positive change.

The COVID-19 crisis is teaching our society the importance of social connection to health and wellness. The irony is that senior living communities, which build their reputations on social programming, are at the same time creating a social isolation crisis in their communities. The danger is that we may lose our primary value proposition of combating social isolation by making social connection hard instead of easy.

From the outset of this series on the importance of social connection, I suggested that COVID-19 would have something to teach us about marketing Life Plan Communities. In the process, we've uncovered the complexities of isolation and connection and how we can respond to them.

With a little help from my friends in the senior living industry, I am excited to share a wide range of tools and strategies that senior living organizations can adopt to intentionally pivot their organization from a care model to a hospitality and purpose driven model, with social connection as the primary driver.

These tools are only part of the solution. To reset our value proposition, a community must also reset its organization. To do this, I suggest we focus on: leadership, education, programming, marketing, space, and technology. By exploring a variety of ways to implement a social connection strategy in Life Plan Community marketing, I am hopeful that we will offer prospective residents an aspirational model for living.

Let's start the conversation.

# Identifying solutions to embracing social connection as a value proposition

## The “Other” Crisis

I was speaking to a CEO of a Life Plan Community that has experienced very few cases of COVID-19 and thankfully few COVID-19 related deaths. But the community’s good fortune has come at a cost – and not in dollars. You see, her community has recorded a record number of significant declines and deaths among residents during the same period. She believes that these residents are declining or dying as a result of social isolation. Without the ability to see family and friends, she believes they have lost the ability to cope with challenges and that some have even lost the will to live.

In another conversation with a colleague who has served the nonprofit senior living industry for over 35 years, I learned that his mother now lives in a retirement community in a city several hours away. His mother called and asked if he would come get her because she was lonely and felt like she was in a prison. Needless to say, my friend was very upset.

Their situations are not unique. A recent *Wall Street Journal* article, titled “[My Benevolent Incarceration in a New Jersey Senior Home](#)” (June 5, 2020), written by a 94-year old assisted living resident, describes the pain of living with loneliness in the midst of COVID-19 restrictions in his community. He describes it this way,

**Residents not quarantined are permitted to walk short distances on the grounds for an hour every weekday under staff supervision, or to sit in chairs on the patio for an hour, also under supervision. Communal dining may increase the risk of infection slightly, but reducing social isolation may be worth the price.**



Part One  
The science

Part Two  
The obstacles

Part Three  
**The solutions**

We may lose our primary value proposition of combating social isolation by making social connection hard instead of easy.

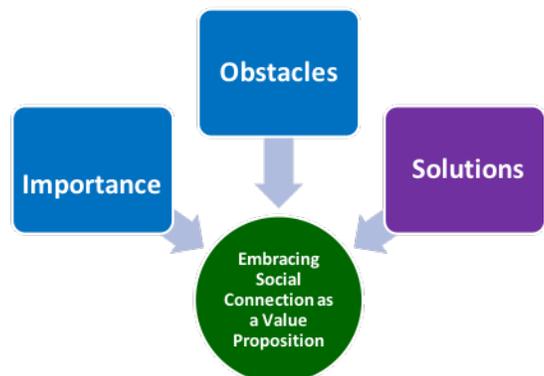
These conversations and stories reflect a growing crisis that is self-inflicted as *many of our communities are contributing to a crisis of social isolation*. However, there is a legitimate reason why communities are taking an extremely risk-averse approach in dealing with COVID-19. Since March, the senior living industry has been under enormous pressure to keep members of their communities safe due to pressure from the media, state and local governments, various regulatory agencies, family members, and even residents themselves. The fear of being highlighted for the wrong reasons in the local or national media is very real. Yet, the price for protecting residents by isolating them is reputation as well as lives.

Interestingly, the COVID-19 crisis is also teaching our society the importance of social connection to health and wellness. The irony is that senior living communities, which pride themselves on social programming, are creating a social isolation crisis in their own communities. And the danger is that *we may lose our primary value proposition of combating social isolation* by making social connection hard instead of easy.

In fairness to my industry colleagues, the growing crisis of social isolation for older adults is not limited to senior living communities. Many older adults who do not live in retirement communities and who receive care at home are also suffering from social isolation and loneliness, mostly because family members do not want care givers coming into the home. What many adult children do not understand is that those care givers give more than care – they create social connection.

From the outset of this series on the importance of social connection, I suggested that COVID-19 would have something to teach us about marketing Life Plan Communities. In the process, we've uncovered the complexities of isolation and connection and how we respond to them. In Part One, "[The Science Behind the Importance of Social Connection](#)," I defined social connection, explained its importance to overall health, and introduced certain nomenclature. In Part Two, "[Identifying Obstacles to Embracing Social Connection as A Value Proposition](#)," I discussed the *Four C's* - *Culture, Care Model, Concealment, and Community* – that keep our industry from fully embracing social connection as a value proposition.

In this third and final installment, "Identifying Solutions to Embracing Social Connection as A Value Proposition," I will identify a range of tools and strategies that senior living organizations can adopt to intentionally pivot their organization from a care model to a hospitality and purpose driven model, with social connection as the primary driver.





## Reset our organizations by focusing on

Leadership  
Education  
Programming  
Marketing  
Space  
Technology

If we pursue resetting our value proposition, we will need to reset our organization. To do so, I suggest we focus on: leadership, education, programming, marketing, space, and technology. I have invited some of my industry colleagues who are passionate about this subject to contribute to this important conversation with essays that demonstrate myriad ways to implement a social connection strategy in Life Plan Community marketing.

### Leadership

As leaders, how can we ensure that we are doing everything we can to pivot our organization from the “care model” of the past to the “hospitality and purpose driven model” of the future that incorporates social connection as a core value proposition?

[As I discuss in a separate paper](#), the inability to create Group Alignment may be the most fundamental organizational failure because many other problems can be traced back to this simple but often-overlooked principle. Proper Group Alignment occurs when the leader or executive team clearly identifies the objectives of the organization and creates systems to maintain organizational alignment. So, if creating social connection becomes a primary part of the mission statement and value proposition, the CEO and the entire executive team have to clearly communicate intent and need in order to make sure everyone understands the rationale for the change or additional focus.

Leaders sometimes assume that everyone is aware of the leader’s intent and that everyone understands the group’s objective and, hence, everyone is aligned. However, unless leaders clearly and frequently *communicate* goals and *receive* clear signals that everyone understands and agrees on those goals, group misalignment will occur, and new initiatives will fail. Group Alignment also creates an environment where staff feel empowered without the need for senior leadership to approve every decision, creating a more effective and efficient organization. In other words, *a culture change needs to occur for this to really work*. And that’s the rub. It is difficult to change culture.

I was reminded of this while working with a community that is developing a new Greenfield senior living community that has “healthy lifestyle” as its vision and primary value proposition. The components of the vision include not only diet and exercise, but also social connection and purpose. And as the project manager explained to me, it was really difficult to get existing senior living communities with an embedded culture to embrace the vision of “healthy lifestyle culture.” Part of the reason is that staff were not educated to the approach and, therefore, not aligned with the vision. *In summary, making social connection and purpose a primary value proposition will require enormous organizational intent and effort to properly communicate and implement, especially at the middle management level.*

## Education

The responsibility for creating Group Alignment and culture change does not stop with the leader. Every person within an organization is both a leader and follower. Leaders may assume that subordinates understand their intent, while many subordinates may fear asking for clarification because they do not want to appear disrespectful, ignorant or incompetent. *Adding a robust education component to a strategy of culture change is critical.*

How to construct and implement a comprehensive education program is beyond the scope of this paper, but I will mention a few strategies. First, identify and communicate why the organization needs to make a culture change. A community in Florida did this by participating in a resident engagement survey that measured

- *How well they engaged and connected residents with leadership and staff,*
- *How well they connected residents with other residents and the greater community,*
- *How well they provided a sense of purpose,*
- *How well they created opportunities for health and wellness, and*
- *How well they helped residents develop coping skills.*

Every person within an organization is both a leader and a follower.

The community thought it was doing well in these areas. However, the results of the survey proved otherwise. The survey initiated an opportunity to create culture change by using identified shortcomings to educate the entire organization as to why a culture change was needed. To foster accountability, teams were created, led by people who were passionate about certain areas, to address the issues identified in the survey.

As I mentioned earlier, it is crucial to educate middle managers. Therefore, another strategy is to empower middle managers and supervisors by developing a training module that could be rolled out to all employees through a virtual platform. The program would follow the same content structure as the white papers in this series, but with specifics. For example, you would describe the specific advantages to being socially connected and being in relationship, the triggers to social isolation, and specific barriers to social connection, all of which are available at [Pearl Creek Advisors](#) and in my [Leading Age presentations](#). Richfield Community in Virginia has gone even further by devoting one of their resident teach-ins to communicate the importance of social connection. So, there are many platforms and opportunities to educate constituents on the importance of social connection and purpose.

## Programming

Leaders must also create systems. Another way of saying this is that programming must be crafted and implemented in a way that creates substance behind this initiative. We need programming that's driven by aspirations for living, not by a need for care. Although this is more difficult to do in the assisted living and skilled nursing environment, [The Green House Project](#) has done just that.



### *Maintaining Social Connectedness in a COVID-19 World*

By Susan Ryan, Senior Director, The Green House Project™

Social connectedness is key to our well-being and survival. Even before COVID-19, the ageism that exists in our country had exasperated the fundamental belief of elders as being “less than,” particularly those living with cognitive impairment. COVID-19 has augmented our ageist society and culture, sadly leaving many elders socially isolated and lonely. Social distancing mandates have further robbed elders the ability to maintain intimate family relationships, the opportunity to nurture friendships, the ability to feel part of a greater community, and often even the ability to be touched.

Green House skilled care homes destigmatize aging and humanize care for those who live and work there. They are small in scale, self-contained, and self-sufficient with elders at the center, surrounded by a self-managed team of care partners. Intended to promote social interaction, reinforce the identity of elders, and create a sense of normalcy, Green House homes are designed to ensure elders have the autonomy and respect they deserve, the opportunity to live life to the fullest, and the ability to live in close community.

The Green House Project's core values of **Real Home**, **Meaningful Life** and **Empowered Staff** seek to assure elders and staff are connected in significant ways. Social interaction is fostered, and a sense of family is created.

**Real Home** is nurtured through the creation of intentional community. Spaces that support social interaction – a living room with fireplace together with an open kitchen, where all meals are prepared and served at a communal dining table – speak to relationship and family. Immediate access to the outdoors facilitates independence for elders to venture outdoors. In a COVID-19 world, elders can interact with family who otherwise would have been unable to see their loved ones. The environment enhances the autonomy and image of the elder and makes them a partner in their lives and care.

**Meaningful Life** happens through intimate relationships. Connecting as individuals, the intrinsic value of each elder is recognized and celebrated. Meaningful engagement dispels misperceptions about elders, particularly those living with dementia, by promoting connections with others in normal, respectful, and age-appropriate ways. Fully integrated with life, connected with, and living with others, elders become part of the fabric of the home and the community at large.

**Empowered Staff** is a fundamental value that direct care workers possess vital information about elders that only a close relationship can engender. Living in intentional community, elders are valued and worthy of relationship, interaction, and respect. This symbiotic relationship creates social connectivity among all who live and work in Green House homes, as well as among the greater community.

The most important ingredient to creating healthy social connection is serving others.

## The Most Important Ingredient

Many articles and books on this subject state the most important ingredient to creating healthy social connection is serving others. According to Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a psychology professor at Brigham Young University, research [indicates](#) that offering support can be as beneficial to the person who offers as to the one who receives. Supporting others helps us understand and believe that we have value to bring to the world. This helps us develop self-worth and respect for ourselves. And, it turns out, this love of ourselves, or self-connectedness, is the foundation that we need to connect to other people.

A recent *Wall Street Journal* article on social isolation mentions “the most compelling strategy to tackle loneliness in older populations is providing opportunities to volunteer and *serve others*.” This is often referred to as “purposeful social interaction” and could be called “Life on Purpose.” The article goes on to say it is especially beneficial to older populations who have the opportunity to volunteer and serve young people. Older adults, like everyone else, want to be defined by what gives them meaning, a sense of belonging, and purpose. One entrepreneur who has developed a program around this idea is the founder of [Cozy Home Community](#). Here is his take on what the future consumer will want.



### *Cozy Home Community: Intentionally Creating Relationships for Middle-income Boomers*

By Matt Thornhill, Founder of Cozy Home Community

Even before the pandemic, the senior housing market was facing a different future with Boomers. Studies confirm that people want to stay in their homes and see **senior housing** as a “**need**” not a “**want**.” And for middle-income seniors, staying in their homes, often alone, is their only option because there are few communities at price points they can afford.

The idea behind Cozy Home Community™ is to design senior housing that fosters and supports community and deep personal relationships. Part-commune, part-*Golden Girls*, part-cohousing, part-independent living, and 100 percent intentional, [Cozy Home Community](#) is specifically designed to meet the desires, sensibilities, and needs of middle-income Boomers.

Three components make this rental model unique:

- **The Homes:** Modular-built 1,200 square foot stand-alone single-story homes, with two bedrooms and bathrooms. Homes are designed for couples or roommates. Eight homes are then arranged in a cluster, or “colony,” around a 1,500 square foot common house. A Cozy Home Community would consist of three to five colonies, or a total of 24 to 40 homes.
- **The Neighbors:** Each colony will be home to people who have something in common with each other — a shared story, shared interests, shared backgrounds, shared connections. By intentionally matching people — not unlike how colleges match dorm roommates — the likelihood of neighbors being friends increases.



- **The Community:** Each resident has to also agree to contribute, as long as they are able, 12 hours a month to the community — lending a hand to a neighbor, handling light landscaping, managing the books, running errands. Studies show people are willing to help each other, but those in need are often reluctant to ask for help. Creating this volunteer model also creates purpose and social connection.

These bright, energy-efficient, low maintenance homes are designed to make the decision to move from one's current house easier. You get your own space, with close proximity to neighbors but with physical distancing built in. The smaller footprint encourages one to invest more in relationships with neighbors with common interests and stories.

As a rental model, middle-income Boomers can sell their house and keep that money for living and healthcare expenses. The goal is a \$1500-1700 monthly rental price point for the two-bedroom homes. With 50 to 80 people in each community, bringing in supportive services can be done cost-effectively, in partnership with local providers or senior living operators.

The future of senior living will be built around creating safe living environments that support deep, personal, lasting relationships with peers you can see daily. That's a Cozy Home Community.

In a recent interview, Bob Kramer, founder and strategic advisor to the National Investment Center (NIC), states,

**Our model should not be based on just entertaining residents. It should be about engaging them. How are people able to 'refire' their sense of human connection, social belonging, purpose and meaning in the senior housing setting? Especially at a time when many older single adults realize how much is lost when they are physically isolated from human connections. There's a huge opportunity to develop programming that appeals to older adults now. To jumpstart the process, a task force could be created to address programming.**

## Marketing

During a tour, sales professionals at senior living communities are good at showing off the beautiful buildings on the property and explaining the wonderful amenities. In addition, they do a wonderful job of detailing the services offered, dining options, transportation options, and most of all, the various care options when they are needed. However, they do not discuss how being a member of the community can change their life by filling their life with greater meaning and purpose.

In an interview that Elizabeth George did for [Senior Living Foresight](#) asked Russell Rush, Managing Partner at [R3R1 Consulting Group](#), "What do you think most sales professionals need to stop or start doing to succeed in this environment?" Mr. Rush responded, "Simply put – we need to stop showing property and start selling a solution. What I'd like to hear more often is why I should use this service and I'd be better off because of it."

Rob Love, CEO of [Love & Company](#), discusses this more fully.



### ***Show, Don't Tell.***

By Rob Love, President/CEO, Love & Company

Twenty years ago, in the first research study Love & Company ever conducted on how seniors respond to advertising, I learned a valuable lesson. After hearing Life Plan Community residents consistently tell us, "I have more friends than ever before," we decided to use it as the headline for an ad. But when we concept tested that ad with prospects, they hated it. Who was to tell them that they needed more friends?

I learned that you can't tell people what they need. They may be lacking meaningful purpose in their lives and not realizing their full potential at home. However, we have to help them develop that realization for themselves.

Our goal as marketers is to inspire prospects to envision their best selves, then guide them to the realization that a Life Plan Community is the environment in which to do so. In our most recent webinar, "[Senior Living Marketing after Shelter at Home](#)," one key strategy we suggest is to show authentic examples of people in your community doing interesting and dynamic things. Use those members of your community to help show what is possible. You want prospects to think, "Those people are experiencing what I want to experience." They are becoming the best of themselves.

The Life Plan Community experience can be transformative. If done well, people go from feeling undervalued and unappreciated to feeling engaged and listened to because a Life Plan Community can help create purpose and a sense of community. Self-esteem and energy can soar. That's the story we need to show, not tell. To demonstrate, we used storytelling to highlight a Life Plan Community member who is sharing his passion of beer brewing through The Brew Crew, a group that produces award-winning beers under the Senior Moment label. The community in New England where he lives helped install the brewing system for him.

In developing marketing materials for prospects, word choice is also critical. Use "joining" a community instead of "moving to" a community. Use "member" instead of "senior" or "resident." We all want to be seen as individuals, not as an anonymous member of a large category. Being a "resident" is not something we aspire to. Being a "member" of a thriving community is.

Earlier in our lives, especially while working, purpose and social connection is easier. As we age, it is easy to lose those vital components to a healthy life. And that is our opportunity: to help lead prospects to the realization that, every day, members of Life Plan Communities are finding social connection, meaning and purpose that our prospects want and need.

## **Space**

Architects love talking about space and how it can impact a person. [In her book, \*Braving the Wilderness\*](#), Brené Brown agrees, saying,

**Places and spaces can hold feelings of disconnection. Sometimes a place can feel lonely because of a lack of closeness and the relationships that are not happening in that space.**

I have spoken with many architects from various firms on this subject, including [SFCs](#), [RDG Planning and Design](#), [Perkins Eastman](#), among others. One firm that has really embraced how space impacts social connection is THW. Their offices contain panels with photos and phrases that encapsulate many of the ideas in this paper. So, I asked Jim Hudgins, President of [THW Design](#) to talk about space and social connection.



### *Designing for Social Confluence*

By Jim Hudgins, President, THW Design

As a design firm focusing on senior environments for more than 30 years, THW strives to create spaces that support opportunities for engagement and social confluence. Spaces we inhabit not only influence how we act and feel, it can contribute to a person's sense of well-being. We now understand that the human need for social interaction is a critical part of health and well-being.

Social isolation among seniors has long been linked to a range of issues including depression, cognitive decline, long term illnesses and longevity. I have witnessed this with my own parents, now approaching 90, living alone in their home with a myriad of underlying health issues (including a recent cancer diagnosis), and living in fear of leaving their home and connecting with others they love. You can sense the hopelessness at times. Although exacerbated by the recent pandemic, this is not a new issue. The senior housing industry has made great strides in shaping buildings and programs in a way to support and encourage social capital. It remains a fundamental part of the unique value proposition that communities can offer to those aging in place at home alone.

As a result, creating social connection has consumed our attention in the design for senior environments, creating spaces that we describe as “energy centers.” These areas help to increase resident awareness, encourage movement, and provide a range of opportunities to engage one another in a variety of ways. Understanding that we each have different needs for personal engagement at different times, spaces range from intimate to larger for gatherings. These can be linked by circulation, intersecting paths, sight lines and transparency, with an understanding that what attracts people more than anything else is the presence of other people. *The most successful applications of this principle provide a range of spaces that stimulate serendipitous engagement, allowing users to participate and retreat easily while still being in the presence of others.*

With the lingering threat of COVID-19, we are faced with a paradigm that may jeopardize our progress. Residents are now being isolated from their friends and family. However, many communities are doing wonderful and creative things to minimize the effects of isolation through improved technology, smaller gatherings, reservations, and greater utilization of outdoor spaces. Even backyard barbecues seem to be re-emerging as an alternative to indoor dining. We will also innovate our way into building better environments by exploiting new technologies for A/I, touchless systems integration, light sanitation, and materials to mitigate the spread of infections.

I remain hopeful that we will not let fear drive us back into old paradigms of over compartmentalization and institutional behaviors that undermine the last twenty years of progress towards greater social connectedness. We must, however, look at this as an opportunity to hit the reset button, redefine “the rules of engagement” and, in the long run, rediscover a better path to minimizing social isolation and creating connectedness.

## Technology

I could devote an entire white paper on how technology can be used to mitigate social isolation. For now, I will briefly describe a few platforms that are available now, that can be implemented to foster social connectedness. Before doing so, however, I would like to preface a discussion on technology with a word of caution. Social connection using technology cannot replace human contact. We are finding that out hard way with COVID-19.

Recent articles have discussed how technology, if used properly and with intentionality, can help mitigate social isolation, but it is not *the* solution. It is only a tool. A recent *New York Times* article dove deeply into this subject. The author even describes how Facebook is promoting its platform as the way to mitigate social isolation during COVID-19. When digging into corporate documents, the author found that Facebook required employees to spend time at corporate headquarters and did not support telecommuting. At its core, the company believes that employees need to be together physically to truly connect emotionally. So, there we have it. The largest social media company in the world does not believe technology can replace the benefit of physically being together.

Science confirms Facebook's belief. The podcast, [Work Life with Adam Grant](#), addresses the challenges of maintaining an effective team in an episode, titled "How Science Can Fix Remote Work," which aired on May 12, 2020. In a remote environment, he says, "shared understanding" and "shared identity" are key ingredients that are lost when working remotely. These are also important needs that are not met during social isolation.

### *The Birdsong Tablet*

Well before COVID-19, Westminster Canterbury on Chesapeake Bay ([W-C Bay](#)) in Virginia decided to develop its own technology to reduce social isolation in its healthcare wing. Residents in assisted living and nursing are at-risk for social isolation and boredom because no community has the human capital to engage with these residents 24/7. Funded by George and Sue Birdsong, who saw the enormous potential of content rich, dementia friendly tablets installed in every room, the technology allows residents to quickly access content and activities of interest, whenever a resident is ready to connect. When compared to residents who did not have digital engagement tools, those with simple touchscreen computers saw a 55% decrease in depression on the Geriatric Depression Scale and a 14% improvement in the quality of life as measured by the Affect Balance Scale.

During the original study, researchers were surprised to discover the impact the tablet had on staff. When the study moved to a new control group, the nursing staff demanded the devices be returned. The devices not only benefitted the residents,

but also improved the life of caregivers. As nonprofit communities continue to face employee recruitment and retention issues, innovative tools like the Birdsong tablets will increase job performance and fulfillment, making the best places to live also the best places to work as labor continues to decline.

In addition to using technology to reduce social isolation in assisted living and skilled nursing, technology platforms are also available to reduce social isolation and improve social wellness in the greater community. To obtain real-time data that can improve social wellness and preempt social isolation, [Wellzesta](#) created an “Electronic Wellness Record” that provides measurable real-time data of the social connectedness and social interactions of users, thus equipping staff with the tools to proactively reach out to residents who may be identified as “at risk” for social isolation. Through this platform, social connection can be enhanced by;

1. Increasing overall social engagement through proven strategies that provide measurable data and outcomes,
2. Equipping staff with tools to identify and pre-empt social isolation, and
3. Creating objective data that measures and communicates the social wellness benefits of moving into a Life Plan Community.

Wellzesta co-founder Kyle Robinson discusses this further.



### *Reducing Social Isolation Through Software Solutions*

By Kyle Robinson, Co-Founder, Wellzesta

There is a growing amount of evidence showing that individuals who report feelings of loneliness are more likely to have health problems later in their life, including The Harvard Study of Adult Development, which found that embracing community helps us live longer and happier lives. Robert Waldinger, in what is now one of the most viewed TED Talks to date, concludes that social connections are one of the most important factors for people’s happiness and health. For the senior living industry, this has vast implications – some problematic, but also provide avenues for positive change. One such avenue is technology.

Technology and software companies like Wellzesta provide platforms for virtual socialization with capabilities to bring people closer together. There is reason to believe that the senior living industry will embrace social connection as a value proposition with the growth of new technologies, the emergence of new care methodologies, and the rousing of public consciousness on social isolation that this “stealth crisis” is creating.

A leading lifestyle and health tech provider, [Wellzesta](#) offers technology solutions that combat social isolation in senior living settings. Through bi-directional communication, on-demand wellness content, predictive analytics, and a personal wellness coach, residents and members can virtually connect. Some of the most tangible outcomes are increased connectedness, enhanced communication, and improved mood. Technology offers a wide variety of tools such as video calls, online learning resources, virtual group connection, and real-time messaging that can combat loneliness and depression.



**Wellzesta**

Innovations in this space continue to evolve. As a company we continue to learn the most by how new features are being used. Since COVID-19, we've seen a distinct increase of 'time in app' for both seniors and caregivers, with a specific interest in topics like alleviating anxiety, increasing mindfulness, embracing meditation, participating in virtual events, and self-care.

When our lack of connection, physical and mental impairments, lack of access to technology, and other such factors limit our ability to engage, they limit, at a fundamental level, our somatic potential to live the lives we deserve—to age with dignity and autonomy. According to a 2019 [National Poll on Healthy Aging](#), more than a third of adults over the age of 50 report feeling a lack of companionship, 27 percent feel isolated in their day-to-day lives, and 28 percent reported having social interactions once a week or less. These statistics are even more amplified during COVID-19.

However, technology companies all over the world are offering open services and free courses and resources to help connect people during COVID-19. This pandemic, although scary and difficult, may ultimately offer greater energy and capital applied to solving the problem of isolation and access to technology; therefore, connecting individuals and communities in a defining, significant way.

As I prepared for a presentation for Leading Age Virginia on social isolation, a few years ago, I had the opportunity to talk to associates at Perkins Eastman who co-authored the [Clean Slate Project](#). Their paper, which took a year to write, defines the drivers of change to the senior living industry. One of the big drivers that they identified is that technology is changing the way older adults connect. In addition, seniors in the future will want a different lifestyle, which will include wellness, connectedness and purpose. Finally, healthcare delivery will be less centralized with navigation, coordination and advocacy as key components. As I outlined in Part 1 of this series, [I call these three drivers Communication, Culture and Coordination](#). Because we have already addressed the first two in this paper, I would like to say a few words about the third driver – healthcare coordination and navigation.

## Healthcare Coordination and Navigation

In addition to providing social connection and purpose, senior living communities are in a position to provide healthcare navigation, coordination, and advocacy as another value proposition. Unfortunately, healthcare coordination falls on adult children or partners, who do not understand the healthcare system, are emotionally involved – which causes duress, and most of all, do not know how to locate available resources. And here is the kicker – the time and energy expended by being the caregiver causes social isolation for the caregiver.

According to [Caregiving in the U.S. 2020 – AARP Research Report](#), family caregivers spend, on average, thirteen days each month – more than 24 hours per week – on

tasks such as shopping, food preparation, housekeeping, laundry, transportation, and giving medication. They spend another 13 days each month researching care services or searching for information about disease, coordinating healthcare appointments, and handling financial matters. This is time that caregivers are not spending on self-care or connecting with loved ones and friends.

As the country continues to age, the need to support caregivers as the cornerstone of society will only become more and more important. Today, more than 1 in 5 Americans (21.3 percent) are caregivers, having provided care to an adult or child with special needs at some time in the past 12 months. This equates to an estimated 53.0 million adults in the United States, up from the estimated 43.5 million caregivers in 2015. Unfortunately, most retirement communities do not offer this value-added service.

There are communities that are addressing this issue head on. A multi-site community in Boston has created a new position called Resident Service Coordinators (RSCs). Eighty percent of people who live a senior living community identified “staff who know me” as the most benefit of living in an aging community model. That is the primary responsibility of an RSC. Assigned to 75 residents, each RSC is trained to act as advocate, liaison, mediator, interpreter, service coordinator, and more. Most importantly, they are social connectors.

In addition, there are technology platforms available that serve as digital social workers, providing proactive intervention and prevention of unnecessary medical expenses, including emergency room visits. [CaringWire](#) is one of those digital

platforms. CaringWire delivers personalized content to assist caregivers in understanding and addressing factors that influence quality of life. The screening, referral, and engagement program considers key social needs that directly impact daily function and ability to live independently. By applying predictive analytics and machine learning CaringWire is able to alert healthcare participants of changes in an individual’s risk over time.

CaringWire’s A/I enabled platform supports the caregiver’s journey by assisting the older adult’s social and health needs; empowering families to optimize decisions, while staying connected. This keeps the family fully engaged by tracking tasks, predicting future needs, and receiving relevant information all in one place; allowing older adults and their family caregivers to lead happier, healthier lives.

**CaringWire Outcomes**

- Proactively identifies member-level risk*
- Connects curated networks to coordinate services*
- Archives combined social and clinical information*
- Keeps families and caregivers informed*
- Tracks and measures well-being*
- Standardizes care navigation and social connection*
- Recognizes risks through SDOH analytics*
- Customizes health services and interventions*
- Empowers individual and caregiver*





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## A Social Recession

In addition to creating an economic recession, the pandemic is also creating what Vivek Murthy describes as a “social recession.” In the [April 20 edition](#) of the podcast, *Hidden Brain*, Murthy, the former surgeon general of the U.S. explains that, like an economic recession, there are things that we can do to mitigate the impact of the current social recession. As he says,

**If we approach this time with intentionality, if we approach this time with a mindset that we are going to double down and focus on both the quality of our time with other people as well as the quantity of time we dedicate to the people we love, then I think we may be able to come out of this much stronger in terms of our human connection with each other than when we began. We may be able to use COVID-19 as a way to reset how we approach relationships and revisit the place that relationships have in our ‘live priority list.’**

And this is what I hope COVID-19 will do for our industry. It is not what happens to you that defines you. It is how you react to what happens to you that defines you. For healthy people and organizations, challenges can actually help create positive change. I hope that instead of pushing communities backwards to a “care model,” COVID-19 will instead push communities forward to reset how we approach our residents and our prospects and revisit the place that social connection and purpose has on our “value proposition list.”

## The Mandate

In the past, we have used “care” as the primary sales message – that’s not a compelling message. It conveys that retirement communities are places to avoid as long as you can. And telemedicine, digital communication and home visits will make it possible for seniors to delay that move indefinitely if the sole reason for the move is to get care. Communities need to describe the ways in which they enhance quality of daily life for their residents by offering an aspirational model for living. As one executive in a community in Virginia explained to me, the number one desire of prospects moving into their community today is “wanting to be a part of a vibrant and inclusive community.”

During COVID-19, we need honest discussions with residents and families about the short-term risks associated with creating additional socialization, but we also need to have honest discussions about the short-term *AND* the long-term risks of increased social isolation. It is no surprise that senior living communities that saw social connection as a value proposition before COVID-19 are doing a better job of mitigating social isolation during the current health crisis than those who did not. I am grateful to my contributing colleagues for joining this conversation and providing some ideas, and I hope this paper will provide some help in the short run, but more importantly, give organizations some tools and strategies to create the confidence to make embracing social connection a mandate. 