

Eden Housing's Cottonwood Place

by Mindy Ault

The Benefits of In-Home Internet Access for Seniors

As the Internet continues to gain relevance and importance in people's daily lives, benefits specific to seniors—those age 65 and older—are becoming more evident. In-home Internet access can provide an important connection to family and friends through email and social media, helping seniors to avoid social isolation,¹ a leading contributor to poor outcomes for seniors in both mental and physical health. A high-speed Internet connection, in particular, allows for video chats, which can provide a sense of closeness beyond what can be gained through email or telephone conversations.²

In-home connectivity can also improve health care delivery to older adults. The use of videoconferencing with medical professionals, for example, can broaden access to health services and improve health outcomes for seniors.³ A study conducted by the Veterans Administration focused on patients receiving mental health services and showed that utilizing high-speed video conferencing to conduct therapy sessions substantially reduced hospital admissions and total hospitalization days among seniors.⁴ These findings are promising for seniors' prospects of aging in place: having access to necessary health information and easier interaction with health care providers through online channels will likely increase seniors' ability to remain living in their homes independently.





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In-home Internet access for seniors can also enhance emotional and intellectual wellbeing. A 2009 analysis by the Phoenix Center for Advanced Legal and Economic Public Policy Studies determined that Internet use by senior citizens was associated with a 20-percent reduction in depression severity.⁵ Researchers from the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at the University of California, Los Angeles found that spending time on the Internet improved cognitive function by stimulating areas of the brain that control decision-making and complex reasoning in middle-aged and older adults with little Internet experience.⁶

Finally, in-home broadband access provides seniors with convenient and immediate access to interactive online tools that explain government programs (e.g., Social Security, Medicare, tax policy).⁷ The ability to access explanatory materials at home provides more privacy and time, in a more comfortable environment, for digesting complex information or seeking answers to sensitive questions than would be possible in a public setting like a library or community computer lab.

According to recent findings from the Pew Research Center, the number of older Americans making use of the Internet is growing, but usage rates decline with income.

The study found that of seniors with an annual household income under \$30,000, only 39 percent report going online, compared to 90 percent of seniors with incomes over \$75,000. This difference is even more pronounced when comparing rates of seniors with broadband connectivity in their homes: only 25 percent of those with annual incomes under \$30,000 have in-home broadband access, compared to 82 percent of those with annual incomes over \$75,000.⁸

Cottonwood Place

In Fremont, California, in 2012, affordable housing developer Eden Housing opened Cottonwood Place, a mixed-use development combining housing and health care services for low-income seniors age 62 and older. Cottonwood Place has 98 individual units, with 10 of these set aside for frail or higher-need seniors and comprises a partnership between Eden Housing, the City of Fremont, and On Lok Lifeways, a senior health services organization. On Lok staffs a clinic and day center on site and offers a PACE (Programs of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly) program, which serves seniors with dual enrollment in Medicaid and Medicare, providing comprehensive medical and social services to help eligible residents live independently at home instead of in a nursing home.

Funding

Development of Cottonwood Place was originally funded through the HUD 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly Program and the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) Program and is primarily supported on an ongoing basis by rental income from residents. Additional operating support is also provided by some public funding via residents' 202 rental subsidy vouchers and occasional grant funding (mostly from foundations) to support special resident services.

Broadband Access

Broadband Internet access is offered, free of charge, in every unit at Cottonwood Place, with Eden Housing paying the full cost of wired broadband access and providing a free modem to each unit. The cost for in-unit access property-wide is \$190 per month; this charge is included as a line item in the property's general operating budget.

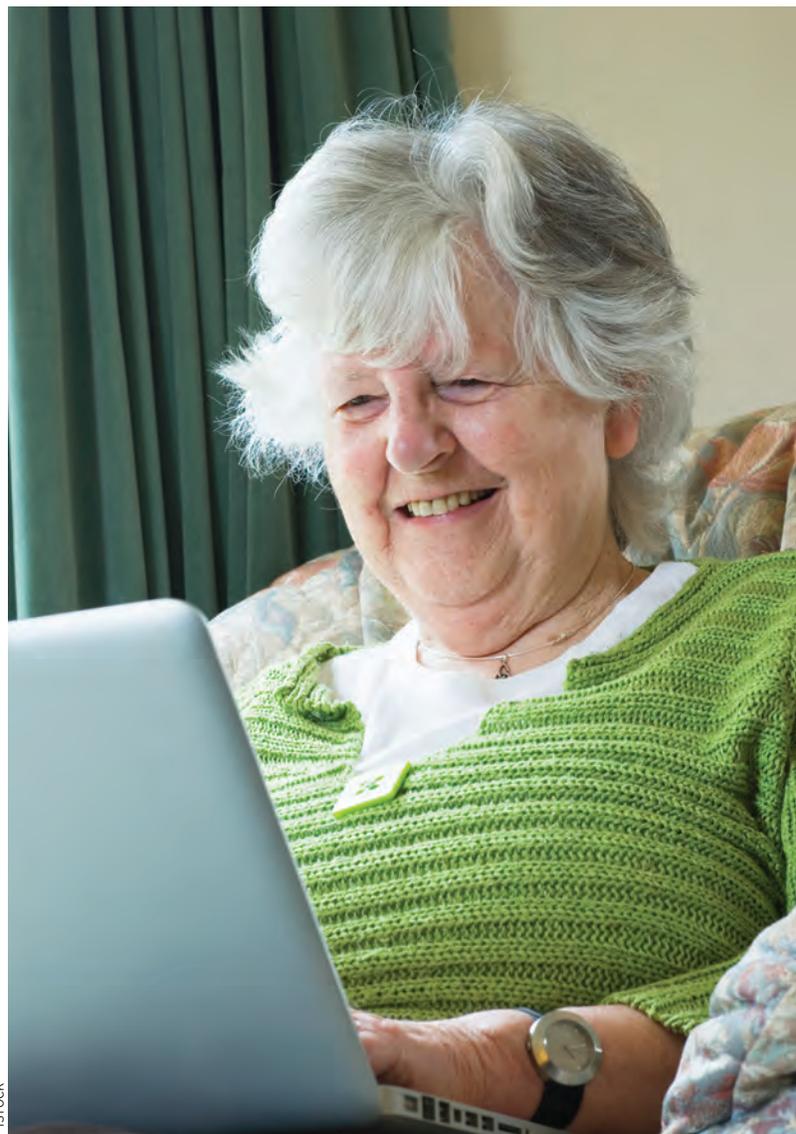
Initially, Eden Housing included free in-unit broadband access in their plan for the property because California's Qualified Allocation Plan (QAP) application for LIHTC tax credits awards additional points to applicants who offer in-unit broadband access to residents. However, Jennifer Reed, Director of Fund Development and Public Relations for Eden Housing, points out that Eden Housing "has a strong commitment to providing (Internet) access to residents" and may well have opted to include free broadband access to residents even without the incentive of additional QAP points if they could have found the means to finance it.

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Broadband Usage and Digital Literacy at Cottonwood Place

In individual units, residents must use their own computer or tablet to access the Internet, but there is a computer lab on site at Cottonwood Place, with computers available for use by all so that residents who do not have a computer can still access the Internet. However, for those who do wish to have their own Internet device, Eden Housing offers low-cost options—starting at \$75 for a tablet and \$120 for a laptop—for purchase through its Communities Wired! initiative, a newly developed program that "promotes digital literacy and broadband adoption across all Eden Housing communities."⁹

Also through the Communities Wired! initiative, Eden Housing offers a digital literacy curriculum, the goal of which is to demonstrate the advantages of Internet connectivity and to instruct residents in how to access and benefit from



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their broadband connection. A study from 2009 showed that digital literacy courses proved to be quite effective in allaying anxiety and improving “computer confidence and computer self-efficacy”¹⁰ in lower-income seniors. According to Reed, during the first year of operation at Cottonwood Place, a resident volunteer taught classes focused primarily on basic applications and social media. Starting this fall, Eden will be resuming classes with an outside volunteer.

Broadband usage records show that about 95 percent of Cottonwood Place residential units have connected a computer, tablet, or smartphone to the Internet using the free modems provided. This could be residents making use of the Internet, or visitors—family members, friends, or caretakers—using their own devices to go online. Reed estimates that 70 to 80 percent of Cottonwood Place residents have a computer or tablet of their own, and that many residents “use the Internet for more channels on their TVs.” A number of residents at Cottonwood Place are immigrants and appreciate being able to access television channels broadcast from their native countries online. Fahim Merzaie, Property Supervisor at Cottonwood Place, estimates that most residents use their broadband connectivity to access email, mainly for staying in touch with friends and family, but also to browse the Internet, check account statements and benefits, and utilize online banking.

Overall, Reed emphasizes, the chief benefit of the in-unit broadband connectivity offered to Cottonwood Place residents is how it gives seniors more tools for aging in place. She points out that “across (Eden Housing’s) portfolio with seniors, we think that less than 50 percent of our seniors are connected. But at Cottonwood, more than 90 percent of our seniors are (online).”

Challenges

According to Reed, there are two primary challenges involved with ensuring that connectivity at Cottonwood Place facilitates aging in place among residents. First, there is the rapid pace at which technology—both equipment and software—becomes obsolete and needs to be upgraded, making it difficult for low-income seniors to keep current with devices and software. Second, the level of bandwidth that is affordable for Eden Housing to provide free to residents generally is not sufficient to support streaming media. A potential solution to this second difficulty might be to tailor the amount of bandwidth provided to each unit based on individual unit usage levels; however, the level of connectivity currently provided does not allow for this type of customization.

ENDNOTES

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