



A New Program Helps Element Care Keep Seniors at Home

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Participants in a new program at Element Care, a nonprofit health care organization with several locations in Massachusetts, are adopting virtual pets. These “byte-size” critters provide a sense of companionship and help combat depression and reduce loneliness among the patients who use them, according to Element Care, which has Merrimack Valley locations in Lowell and Methuen. These “pets,” or “avatars” as they’re called, remind their “owners” to take their medications or to exercise. They also keep an eye out for signs of distress.

The animated virtual cats and dogs operate on a 4G data network, the same that’s used by most cellphones. Participants don’t need WiFi in their homes to take advantage of the avatar’s functions, which include video chat, photo sharing, music and games, along with more serious applications such as 24/7 patient support, appointment scheduling and wellness coaching.

The avatar program accords well with Element Care’s mission as a PACE center (Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly). PACE is a service for seniors on Medicare and Medicaid that’s designed to help them live safely and comfortably in their own homes, allowing them to remain part of their local communities, rather than being relocated to nursing facilities. There are also Medicare-only and private pay options. When participants opt into the PACE program, they are given access to the wide array of health care services that Element Care provides, which range from primary care and meals to occupational therapy. To qualify for PACE, participants must be at least 55 years old, want to live in the community but need assistance to qualify for nursing home care, and be considered safe

Top: Donald Enoch jokes with his virtual dog, Mary, on how she is his new best friend. Mary has assisted in keeping Donal living safely at home by helping with daily reminders for medication, eating healthy, exercising and visiting his pharmacy team at PACE.



Element Care's Clinical Services Project Administrator, Kendra Seavey, is working with Care.Coach to integrate innovative technology in participant's homes through an interactive tablet device that provides enhanced continuity of care and decreases healthcare costs.

to live in the community when supported by the program.

These virtual pet avatars are the brainchild of Victor Wang, a former MIT student who came up with the idea in 2012 to provide companionship for his grandmother, who lived alone in Taiwan. She had become depressed and lonely, Wang says, and his digital pet provided her with the companionship she craved. Today, Wang's company, care.coach, works with health care organizations such as Element Care to provide avatars to patients.

According to an internal 2017 study conducted by Element Care and care.coach, the avatar pilot program reduced avoidable emergency room visits among its participants as well as the need for in-home services. This is in line with Element Care's goal of enabling patients to remain in their own homes, according to Kendra Seavey, clinical administrative manager at Element Care.

In order to qualify for Element Care's avatar program, a participant must show potential for an increased need for in-home psychosocial support, reduction in nursing visits, emergency room visits or hospital admissions. From March to August 2017, the avatars have facilitated 42 medical interventions in cases of cardio-respiratory distress, pain, psychiatric behaviors, falls, vomiting, and drug and alcohol abuse. These categories make up nearly 80 percent of emergency room visits by Element Care's patients, according to the study.

"The avatar is both a caregiver and the patient's best friend," says Dr. Elisabeth Broderick, Element Care's medical director. "It has the potential to provide care overnight, a time that is difficult to cover for family members and agencies. This eases pressure on caregivers while streamlining critical aspects of the health care process."

Element Care is the first organization to launch an avatar program in the Merrimack Valley. As of this writing, about 19 patients have avatars at home. Due to the program's success, it is set to expand this year. Element Care is working to refine the qualification criteria and improve the onboarding process.

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