

Combatting seniors' isolation a mission for Aurora woman

Social distancing and limited access to retirement and long-term care homes has left many seniors feeling more isolated than ever before ? when sometimes all they want is someone to talk to.

That is an issue identified by Aurora resident Jules Masset and one she is looking to address through the recently established 'Let's Chit Chat!' Virtual Program for Seniors.

Let's Chit Chat is a program designed to 'enrich the lives of seniors' through virtual care in retirement and long-term care residences.

The intent is to connect seniors through computers, tablets, and just even over the phone to provide social interaction on a one-on-one basis.

'Originally, this was created for those who are in long-term care homes and the idea is because with COVID and all of the restrictions and rules, people can't actually go in to visit anybody, whether in retirement homes or long-term care homes,' says Ms. Masset. 'Here, everyone stays safe and you can still have those important social interactions with seniors.'

'All of last year, I was working part-time in a retirement home in Newmarket and I was trying to figure out creative ways in how I could support and help seniors because I was seeing firsthand how much the loneliness was impacting them from a health standpoint. By December of last year, I came up with Let's Chit Chat and launched it in February.'

While the program is still in its early stages, Ms. Masset says her ultimate goal is to have the program across Ontario and has reached out to the Provincial Government, and particularly the Ministry of Long-Term Care, with a pitch that she's still waiting to hear back on.

'I want to help seniors today and not in five years' time,' she says.

Should the program move forward to the next level, its implementation could be reasonably straightforward. All that would be required in reach residence, she says, is a single point person to facilitate the senior with the device ? whether it is a phone or an iPad ? to make that connection through platforms like Facetime and Zoom.

'Some seniors are technology-challenged, so some do prefer just using the phone, and that is something that we offer,' she says. 'On a virtual platform, you get that face-to-face interaction that we haven't been able to get on a regular basis for the past year or so, and seniors who are actually living alone in residential homes ? which is a huge issue ? some of them don't even have wi-fi or internet. People can basically purchase a one-time call or they can purchase on a monthly or yearly basis ? it all depends on whether it's for a corporation (such as a for-profit long-term care residence).'

'When I was a volunteer at Mackenzie Health for almost three years, it is unbelievable how much seniors open up and welcome that conversation. There may be a little bit of reluctance [to reach out], but it is like therapy or anything like that: you've got to have that connection with the person you are speaking to on the other end of the phone.'

'The new normal is really driving the need for technology and I believe that as we move forward you're going to find that technology is going to be used far more than it is today. The seniors we have today can be a little technology-challenged, but in another 10 years from now, when we go to that next generation of elderly, we're all using iPads, we're all using iPhones, and I think it is definitely the way of the future. It is important to recognize that loneliness is one of our greatest public health issues, not just here but globally.'

For more information on the Let's Chit Chat program, visit letschitchat.ca.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative