

Connecting Residents in Affordable Housing

LEADINGAGE CALIFORNIA TO SPONSOR LIGHTHOUSE DIGITAL LITERACY PROGRAM

by DAVID LINDEMAN



Of the many lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, social isolation in senior affordable housing emerged as one of the greatest negative impacts on residents. Limited internet access, compounded by the lack of digital literacy, continues to this day as a persistent challenge to providers and residents alike.

LeadingAge California is excited to sponsor a comprehensive program to support members who are interested in implementing internet connectivity in residential communities and offering a customizable digital literacy training program for residents through the Lighthouse for Older Adults program. The Lighthouse Playbook, a step-by-step guide to implementing the program, was developed by two LeadingAge California members in collaboration with the University of California Center for Information Technology Research in the Interest of Society (CITRIS). It is now available to all LeadingAge California affordable housing providers and beyond.

In addition to mitigating social isolation, the internet has become a critical tool for older adults in obtaining medications online, ordering groceries, scheduling program services, and staying in touch with family and friends. Yet hundreds of thousands of low-income older adults in California lack the basic digital literacy skills they need due to barriers to access, affordability, and training. Furthermore, infrastructure and technology challenges vary from community to community.

Lighthouse for Older Adults was designed to bring connectivity to senior housing communities by addressing specific infrastructure barriers and technology needs of communities with digital literacy training tools for residents. While Lighthouse for Older Adults was a response to COVID-19's impact on the isolation of older adults in residential settings, it is now being offered to California's affordable housing and senior living providers in order to tackle the biggest pain points for at-risk older adult populations: lack of access to the internet and basic technology training. Lack of broadband access and the skills to take advantage of it is associated with fewer telehealth visits, increased social isolation, and increased negative health outcomes for low-income older adults. "Lighthouse isn't just about introducing the internet," said Davis Park, Vice President, Front Porch Center for Innovation and Wellbeing. "It's also about digital inclusion, promoting health and wellness, and empowering our older adults to be members of our connected society in a post-COVID world."

The Lighthouse Playbook provides a framework to assessing each community's connectivity needs as well as guidance on providing technology to residents, including materials for staff to implement a proven, peer-led digital literacy training program. The ultimate goal of Lighthouse is to connect residents through an affordable and sustainable program that can meet the specific needs of each community. The Playbook addresses the unique needs of residents through the lens of the many cultures, backgrounds and languages represented within senior living communities across California. The Lighthouse partners successfully deployed the project in 14 languages.

The Lighthouse Playbook was developed and tested initially by teams from Front Porch and Eskaton in six pilot affordable housing communities in Southern and Northern California; two new test sites were added later. The Playbook covers multiple options for determining the best approach to installing broadband infrastructure and WiFi, selecting the most appropriate technology for residents, and providing a sustainable digital literacy training solution, all based on the unique needs of each community's residents and staff.

“We are pleased to offer the Lighthouse for Older Adult Playbook to members as part of our broader efforts to give members actionable tools to improve the health and well-being of older adults,” said Jeannee Parker-Martin, President and CEO of LeadingAge California. Sheri Peifer, Board Vice Chair for LeadingAge California and President for Eskaton adds, “Lighthouse has allowed us to rapidly and economically bring internet to our residents living in affordable housing.”

Lighthouse for Older Adults was developed through the efforts of the leadership team of Sheri Peifer, President, and Therese ten Brinke, Executive Director of Innovation and Impact, both of Eskaton; Kari Olson, Chief Innovation and Technology Officer of Front Porch; Davis Park, Vice President of the Front Porch Center for Innovation and Wellbeing; Jennifer Lee, Program Manager of the Front Porch Center for Innovation and Wellbeing; and the many staff and residents who contributed to the pilot process. The program was established with initial support and guidance from CITRIS at University of California,

Berkeley under the direction of Dr. David Lindeman, Executive Director of CITRIS Health, and Dr. Gale Berkowitz, Associate Director of CITRIS Health.

Internet access in the 21st century is critical for older adults' safety, social connectivity, and communications. With the recent passage of the federal infrastructure bill, senior housing providers in California, as well as the rest of the nation, will soon have unprecedented access to significant funding from the federal government to install and/or upgrade broadband. The Lighthouse program not only empowers older adults with the digital literacy skills they will need to survive and thrive in today's world, it also offers providers ideas for obtaining funding to install broadband and adaptable materials to customize a digital literacy solution for residents. We have all the data that tells us that improved internet connectivity and digital literacy training can lead to improved health outcomes, wellbeing, longevity, and wellness for older adults. Lighthouse offers providers the roadmap for providers to efficiently introduce infrastructure and training in any community.

To access the Lighthouse Playbook and learn more about replicating the program, please contact Meghan Rose, General Counsel & Chief Government Affairs Officer at mrose@leadingageca.org. ■

David Lindeman, Ph.D., is the Executive Director at CITRIS Health, CITRIS and the Banatao Institute.

