

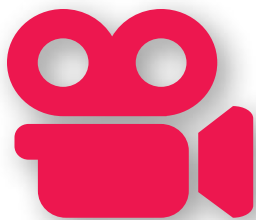
Photo: Dorothy Sbi



Marilynn Larkin, MA

# Boosting resident engagement,

supporting staff with data-driven technology



## **Juniper Communities implements Linked Senior technology to track and improve resident engagement**

by Marilyn Larkin, MA

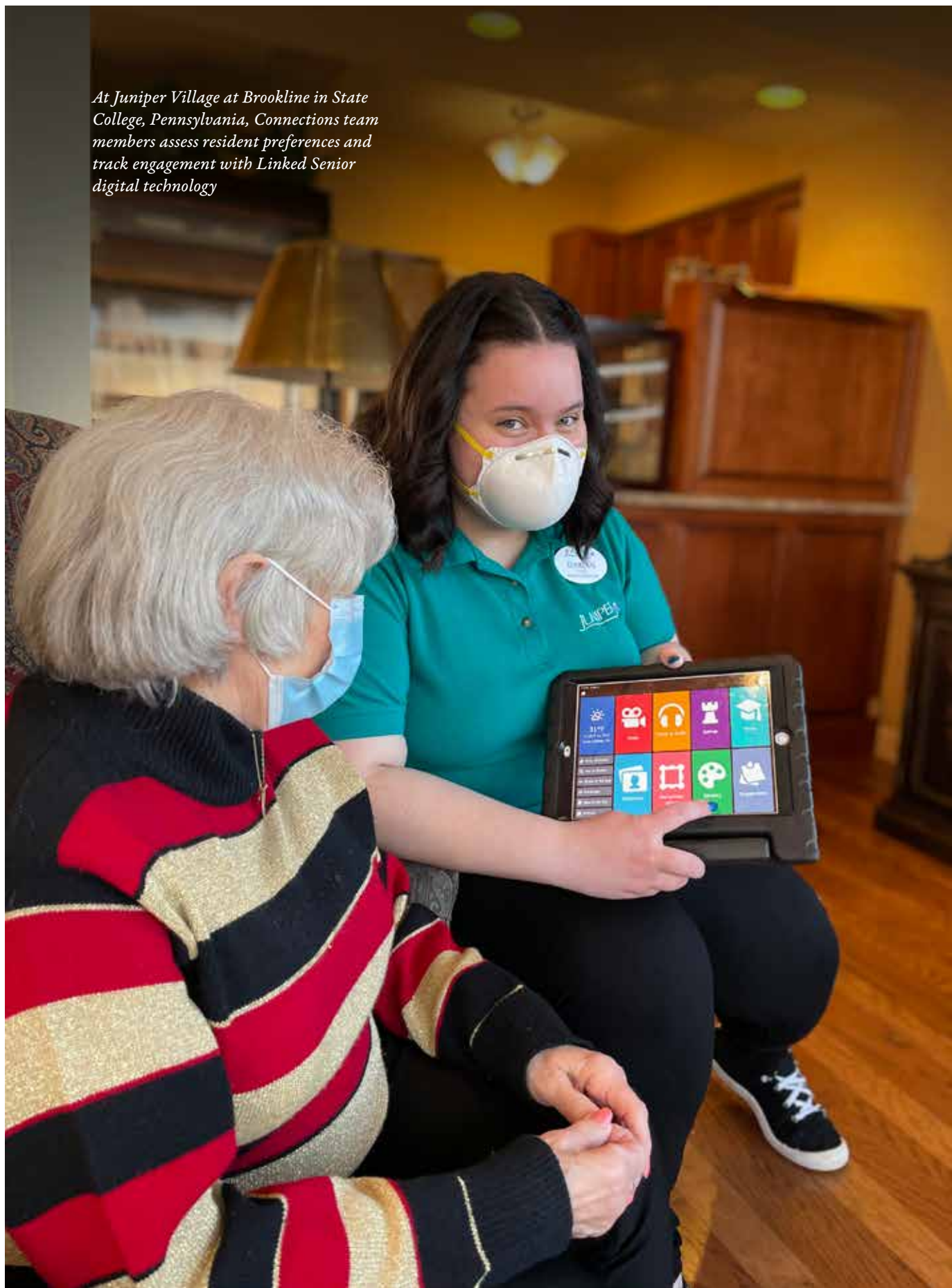
*The International Council on Active Aging\* and NuStep, LLC, presented Juniper Village at Brookline with a 2019 ICAA NuStep Beacon Award for its “Best in Wellness” achievements. Every year the Beacon Award program recognizes 25 North American senior living communities that have successfully fostered a culture and an environment that supports wellness for all who live and*

*work there. See “Resources” on page 34 to learn where to find more information about the award.*

A June 2020 article in the journal *Global Health Research and Policy* highlighted the “unprecedented challenge” of the current coronavirus pandemic, particularly for older adults.<sup>1</sup> According to author Bei Wu, PhD, of New York University’s Aging Incubator and Hartford Institute for Geriatric Nursing, “The outbreak of COVID-19 will have a long-term and profound impact on older adults’ health and well-being. Social isolation and loneliness are likely to be one

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*At Juniper Village at Brookline in State College, Pennsylvania, Connections team members assess resident preferences and track engagement with Linked Senior digital technology*



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*Residents of Juniper Village at Brookline use Linked Senior's touch-screen application to access content across a range of areas. Staff also turn to the platform to augment their programming*

of the most affected health outcomes," she writes. "[They] are major risk factors that have been linked with poor physical and mental health status."

Wu highlights, among other approaches to overcoming these effects, "developing innovative technology-based interventions to improve social connections...." She also emphasizes "engaging the healthcare system to begin...developing methods to identify social isolation and loneliness in healthcare." As we saw in the *Journal on Active Aging's* 2020 special technology issue, many active-aging organizations have embraced technological solutions to deal with pandemic-related restrictions that dampen social connections and engagement.

Washington, DC-based Linked Senior, a resident-engagement platform primarily aimed at senior living, is among the companies helping communities address the impact of these restrictions head-on.

"Lack of engagement is one of the most devastating impacts of COVID-19 on senior living residents," Charles de Vilmorin, Linked Senior CEO and cofounder, comments in a recent *JAA* interview. Even before the pandemic, "activity and life enrichment professionals were overworked, understaffed and often ill-equipped to meaningfully engage their residents. The pandemic has placed additional obstacles in their path," de Vilmorin says. These obstacles include:

- "restriction on who can enter communities, including outside help used in the past for leading engagement activities;"
- "a temporary end to group activities, with a new focus on providing one-on-one engagement that supports physical distancing"; and
- "less time for meaningful engagement with additional tasks added to the to-do list of activity and life enrichment staff around safety and infection control."

According to an April 2020 Linked Senior survey including 239 activity and life enrichment professionals, in order to provide residents with the same experiences they had before COVID, senior living communities today would need to hire at least

1.2 additional full-time employees.<sup>2</sup> This is not an option for most organizations. (Also see the sidebar, “Looking past the pandemic,” on page 36.)

For communities such as Juniper Village at Brookline, an award-winning continuing care retirement community in State College, Pennsylvania, Linked Senior is helping to bridge the gap. Juniper Village’s 22-acre campus is home to 250 older adults. The *JAA* recently talked with Connections Director Jill McKenrick to learn specifically how her community has been using the platform and what they envision for the future.

**ML:** *Jill, what prompted you to start working with Linked Senior?*

**JM:** In 2016, we were looking for ways of not only going paperless with all documentation, but also ways to decrease documentation time—effectively, a digital strategy to streamline the planning and assessment processes to enable staff to spend more time engaging with residents. We had been utilizing paper methods for monitoring engagement and participation. This meant we were not able to track trends or notice similarities among our residents’ interests and preferences.

**ML:** *You’ve noted that the ability to home in on residents’ preferences has been a key advantage. How so?*

**JM:** The graphs that [the Linked Senior platform] generates help us get a better idea of the population that we’re serving. The graphs are in different colors, so I can see, for example, the percentage of residents that used to like something in the past versus something they would like to learn to do in the future—that has been a game changer for me. I used to look at these graphs and see that people said they like cooking, for instance. Yet, I was striking out a lot when I’d try to get residents to cook with me, and they didn’t sign up.

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## Linked Senior: A focus on resident engagement

In a nutshell, Linked Senior produces evidence-based and clinically validated software to support a person-centered approach to engagement and connection for older adults, particularly those in senior living. Charles de Vilmorin, CEO and cofounder, explains the key components of the organization’s resident-engagement process:

- 1. Resident preferences analysis.** Every resident’s preferences are tracked consistently using an evidence-based tool such as the Preferences for Everyday Living Inventory (PELI) that captures data points about a person. This personal data is stored, updated and analyzed by staff on a regular basis to ensure activities match preferences.
- 2. Program planning.** Staff cluster residents into different types of activities based on residents’ expressed preferences. Staff also provide personalized one-to-one sessions to engage residents who do not enjoy group settings or who have difficulty engaging with the community.
- 3. Measurable engagement.** Engagement opportunities are considered both for resident well-being and therapeutic impact and cost. Effectiveness is measured in real time to help ensure return on investment.

**4. Real-time data reporting.** If residents are losing or have lost self-recreation ability and rely on a care partner to find purpose, it is even more important to track activity and engagement participation. It is not possible for staff to know in real time who has been engaged and how well without access to data.

“In the end,” de Vilmorin says, “a resident engagement professional should be able to answer ‘yes’ to the following three questions:

- Are all residents being engaged?
- Are residents being engaged based on their preferences?
- Are residents experiencing optimal well-being?”

“The old standard of activities in senior living is often described as the 3Bs: Bingo, Bible, Birthday,” de Vilmorin notes.

“There is no inherent problem with any of these activities,” he continues. “But this standard indicates a programming limitation in senior living communities today that originates with a failure to empower staff members with effective training and tools they can use to deliver a more meaningful and truly person-centered experience.”

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## Resources

### Internet

#### ICAA NuStep Beacon Award

<https://beaconaward.icaa.cc>

#### International Council on

#### Active Aging

[www.icaa.cc](http://www.icaa.cc)

#### Juniper Communities, LLC

<https://junipercommunities.com>

#### Linked Senior, Inc.

[www.linkedsenior.com](http://www.linkedsenior.com)

#### #ActivitiesStrong

[www.linkedsenior.com/activities-strong](http://www.linkedsenior.com/activities-strong)

#### #ActivitiesStrong Manifesto

[www.linkedsenior.com/blog/2020/04/activities-strong](http://www.linkedsenior.com/blog/2020/04/activities-strong)

#### NuStep, LLC

[www.nustep.com](http://www.nustep.com)

### Print

Linked Senior. (2020). 2021: The Year of Resident Engagement. An #ActivitiesStrong Executive Edition White Paper. Available for download at <https://www.linkedsenior.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/white-paper-2021.pdf>

Wu, B. (2020). Social isolation and loneliness among older adults in the context of COVID-19: a global challenge. *Global Health Research and Policy*, 5, 27. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41256-020-00154-3>

When I looked more closely at the graphs, it turned out that residents said they *used* to enjoy cooking, not that they like cooking now. So, I started doing educational cooking demonstrations—they didn't have to cook, but they could eat the food after—and those are a hit. So, understanding a former versus a current interest has really changed our programming in general and led to more attendance.

In fact, we documented that in 2017, only 65% of residents were attending programming for an average of 12 minutes a day each. In 2018, after implementing the platform, our resident participation rate went up to 93%, for an average of 21 minutes a day per resident.

We also increased the number of programs we provided in response to our assessments. In 2017, we offered 1,461 programs, whereas in 2018 we were up to 2,130 programs—an increase of 145%. As an example, one resident's engagement participation more than doubled. When she first moved into the community, she did not attend many programs and was unsure if she wanted to continue living at Juniper. With help from the Connections engagement team and the support they had from digital technology, this resident became much more engaged. She went from attending 422 programs in 2017 to 1,118 programs in 2018.

**ML:** *You mentioned that the platform helps staff, too.*

**JM:** Yes, especially because these graphs are interactive. So, let's say I am going to lead an educational activity on national parks. I can look through the topics on the platform and see that there's a section about trips and travel, nature and parks. If I click on it, it gives me a list of residents who are interested in those activities. This is helpful for newer associates who might not know the residents yet, and who have been tasked with gathering residents for the activity.

We have 120 residents in our assisted living and we can't invite everyone to every

activity. But if the associates pull up the list, they'd probably see at least 25 residents who we know are interested in national parks. We know we're going to get more yeses and more active participants because we're inviting the people who want to do it.

**ML:** *Drilling down a bit, how does Linked Senior help you select the right programs for each resident?*

**JM:** Juniper has an intensive intake program called My Life Story, that enables us to know a lot about residents, their past and current concerns and interests. Linked Senior was able to digitize that for us through the electronic health records, so we can input all that information and visualize it—again using graphs. For example, we learned through My Life Story that a resident loves to write, and can also tell stories. Learning that, I scheduled her to do a weekly storytelling session. The other residents enjoy this session while that resident now has a sense of purpose and meaning through teaching others.

We use another program called Music and Memory. Again, digitized results from that program's assessment tool allows me to see my residents' music preferences. Sometimes the results are unexpected! For example, I was surprised to learn that a large population of residents likes Kenny Rogers' music. We hadn't really considered playing country and western music as we didn't think it would interest our demographic.

**ML:** *Isn't there a risk of only giving residents what they've asked for? How can they be introduced to something new that they might enjoy but have never tried?*

**JM:** One way [to ensure residents have opportunities to try new things] is to keep up with people who have expressed a future interest in something. In the interview process, they might say, for example, "You know, I've always wanted to swim." I'll input that info. If I see on my graph that a good handful of people would like to learn something—creative writing, for example—then I can offer

the program to them, as well as to the people who currently are interested.

While it's not as easy to allow for an interest to be sparked by chance, it does happen. I tell my team to invite as many people as possible to every activity. Sometimes, we'll touch on someone who's trying something new. Or, we might have a resident who says no every day to the same activity, then one day, he or she says yes. I've had a few of those success stories.

**ML:** *Do you use the content that comes with the platform?*

**JM:** We use our own programs as well as Linked Senior's built-in apps, which mostly supplement what I'm already doing. They have additions, like slideshows and trivia questions, on many topics. Those are things I don't have time to create on my own for

an activity. Going back to national parks, for instance, if I were doing an educational discussion previously, I would have to make a slideshow of photos or come up with trivia questions myself. Now, I can combine my own content with the platform's for a quality educational program. So, when I do the presentation on national parks, much of the work is already done for me: The photos are there and labeled, and I have trivia questions to add throughout.

Another example is a new theatre program we started for our residents. The most recent show we did was *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. We were able to orient our actors to the musical by showing them scenes from the show and letting them listen to the songs, and we did that through the app.

I felt strongly, when we added the platform, that it could never replace our live pro-

gramming. So, we never leave it on and walk away. What the content does is help to boost the quality of the programs we're offering, which saves staff time and enables us to develop engaging programs more rapidly.

**ML:** *What challenges did you encounter in implementing and using the Linked Senior platform, and how did you address them?*

**JM:** Assessing residents for their interests, life histories and preferences is vital to creating resident-focused experiences. However, staff members are not always comfortable asking every single assessment question, or they may skip questions to save time, which means we sometimes end up with incomplete assessments and insufficient data. One way we're addressing this barrier is by training staff to use a conversa-

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tion-style interview for assessments and to explain to residents how their answers will inform program development.

Another obstacle staff needed to overcome was determining which residents were not as confident participating, and ensuring they received personalized invitations to programming to encourage higher participation and meaningful engagement.

**ML:** *What do you think is required to ensure success with the platform from an operational perspective?*

**JM:** From an operational perspective, first and foremost, we had to increase our wireless Internet capabilities to allow for high-speed Internet throughout our community. It's also important to ensure that associates get training on how to properly use the community app.

With regard to return on investment, resident engagement is about providing avenues for all residents to connect with their purpose. Given the large number of residents, their extraordinary differences in terms of background and interests and physical/cognitive abilities, it is impossible for us to deliver on our person-centered care promise without being data-driven and using tools to measure and manage engagement, which we now have.

The proof is in the perception of the Connections team's role. Once perceived as a cost-generating department, we are now seen as a driving force of the business and a cornerstone of the Juniper experience. 📞

*Marilynn Larkin, contributing editor to the Journal on Active Aging®, has been involved in technology and the web since 1995 and published extensively about her experiences. Her early work encouraged consumers and medical professionals to go online, and she had her own "WebWatch" page in The Lancet. Larkin's current interests include technologies that boost communication and connection, provide support and motivation, and prompt innovation.*

*Questions or comments? Email: mlarkin@icaa.cc*

## References

1. Wu, B. (2020). Social isolation and loneliness among older adults in the context of COVID-19: a global challenge. *Global Health Research and Policy*, 5, 27. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41256-020-00154-3>

2. De Vilmorin, Charles. (2020, June 22). COVID-19 broke resident engagement. This is how we fix it. *McKnight's Long-Term Care News*. Retrieved from <https://www.mcknights.com/marketplace/covid-19-broke-resident-engagement-this-is-how-we-fix-it>.

Images courtesy of Juniper Communities

## Looking past the pandemic

On January 7, 2021, Linked Senior released a white paper, "2021: The Year of Resident Engagement." The paper acknowledges that, because of the pandemic, "2020 was the most challenging year in the history of the senior living industry." That said, with vaccines being distributed and changes in infection rates, providers are turning their attention to such issues as social isolation, staffing shortages and staff burnout.

Data in the white paper are based on Linked Seniors' Resident Engagement Index Score (REIS) assessment, created through the company's #ActivitiesStrong initiative (whose aim is to support, empower and educate senior-living activity and life enrichment professionals). Information from more than 418 respondents as of November 20, 2020, points to the benefits of technological solutions to support staff and improve outcomes.

Specifically, the survey showed that when resident preference data are stored electronically, staff are twice as likely to create individualized plans for each resident and 133% more likely to build community and groups. When using electronic engagement platforms, staff are 162% more likely to say they know if residents are engaged in programs in real time and 183% more likely to say they know if programs match resident preferences.

The survey also revealed a consensus among providers that about 85% of a senior-living community population should be engaged at any one time to fight back against isolation. An analysis of the REIS data showed that 35 minutes per day is a good overall goal for resident engagement. Linked Senior cautions that variations occur depending on level of care and preferences and needs of residents.

Finally, the white paper cites de Vilmorin as follows: "To truly understand the value of life enrichment, we need to imagine how the senior living industry would have fared without it during 2020. During this pandemic, I believe that almost all of the positive, innovative and proud moments in senior living communities came from activity and life enrichment directors and their residents—they are essential and they are true heroes that make our industry #ActivitiesStrong."

## Reference

- Linked Senior. (2020). 2021: The Year of Resident Engagement. An #ActivitiesStrong Executive Edition White Paper. Available for download at <https://www.linkedsenior.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/white-paper-2021.pdf>.