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Seniors learn how to send love over the wires

Barbara Boelk Lake Elmo Leader

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Betty Edstrand doesn't really know how Caregram works, she's just happy it does.

Edstrand, who for two years has lived at Oak Meadows Assisted Living in Oakdale with her husband, uses a new program called Caregram to send and receive e-mails.

But Caregram isn't a typical e-mail program.



Above: Frank Borash, Ruth Ridenour and Frank Prestley gather around as Stephanie Weiger, activities director at Oak Meadows, demonstrates how the senior residents are now able to send handwritten letters through a program called Caregrams. (Photo by Andy Blenkush)

The system is a way to allow nursing home and assisted living residents remain connected to their families on a more regular basis, and it facilitates that through the use of computerized mail.

"My first reaction to this was that it would be great as long as we didn't have to have a computer," Edstrand said.

Many residents at Oak Meadows don't have their own computers and are intimidated to learn how to use them, said activities director Stephanie Weiger.

The building does have a computer lab, and some residents use it, Weiger said, but they have to be trained on the computers and the lab is not staffed by employees to help those residents who might need it. "It's really independent," Weiger said. "Most of the residents don't use computers, never have."

"I would have liked to have had a computer back then," said resident Frank Prestley, a nine-year resident.

"I just don't have a need for one now." Prestley now receives notes and pictures from his children through Caregram. He even received pictures of a Colorado blizzard nearly two days before it made the national news.

The Caregram program is run from a main terminal at the receptionist station in the front lobby. Residents can sign up to participate for free. They give a staff member the names and e-mail addresses of friends and family and those are entered into a personal address book for the resident.

The resident also is given a personal e-mail address so they may receive notes and pictures.

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When a resident receives a Caregram, it automatically prints at the terminal and the resident is called to the receptionist area to pick up their "mail."

The resident may then reply with a hand-written note that is scanned into the system and sent as a PDF.

One of the greatest benefits of the system, Weiger said, is the increased communication with Oak Meadows residents and their families.

Frank Borash has seven children. Five live in different parts of the country and two are relatively local.

Borash said he likes the Caregram system because he can get family news immediately.

"We keep up with each other," Borash said. "It gets here almost instantly. It's very quick."

Fifteen Oak Meadows residents are enrolled now, but more are talking about the system, the residents said.

"It surprises me every time we get one," Betty Edstrand said. "It's amazing because here I am getting e-mail and I don't even have a computer."

Ruth Ridenour, who has lived at Oak Meadows for seven years, keeps in touch with her four boys through Caregram. She said she's recently received pictures of her young grandchildren through the system.

Idea based on digital writing

The idea for Caregram came from the president of Talario, a digital writing products company based in Brookings, S.D.

It emerged from a personal experience, said Talario's product development director, Jon Gross, who lives in Woodbury and works from an office near Oak Meadows.

The nephew of Talario's owner, Tim Aughenbaugh, was hospitalized for a few weeks some years ago and friends and family often sent e-mailed messages through the nurses' station to be delivered.

"Those e-mails did so much to help his nephew and his recovery," Gross said. "We were all talking about it and thought it would be a great idea if somehow his nephew could have sent back messages without having to get on the computer himself."

Now, one year after its emergence, the popularity of the product is growing, Gross said.

He said Oak Meadows is the first assisted living facility in the state to host the Caregram product, a way for Talario to further test its viability and popularity. Gross said several assisted living and nursing home facilities in South Dakota also feature the product.

"It's really great to see people get excited about it," Gross said of the reactions he gets when he introduces the product to assisted living centers. "You hear people telling their stories 'Grandma, you're cool. You've got an e-mail account.' The joy and excitement we've seen is the best reward."

Talario is especially interested in preserving the unique aspects of corresponding through handwriting, Gross said. That's why Caregrams from residents aren't re-typed by the receptionist.

"There's something about handwriting that is very unique and distinctive," Gross said. "When we look at it, everybody knows: 'Yes, that's grandma's handwriting.'"

Keeping family ties strong is important for the overall health and well being of residents of assisted living and nursing homes, Weiger said.

“They need to feel in the loop and something like this is a great way for them to do it,” she said.

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