

# Curry Senior Center steps up with homeless-to-healthy pilot

## Tech-driven Vitality Project finds help from companies outside the neighborhood

▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

foundation's "first foray" in the United States and turned up Curry. He and Knego met and agreed Curry's on-site housing for 13 homeless seniors made it an ideal setting to showcase the possibilities with a pilot.

Its unofficial launch in April took advantage of a San Francisco visit by Amsterdam Mayor Eberhard van der Laan, part of a diplomatic tour to encourage the two cities to work together on using technology to offset urban problems. Van der Laan handed out iPads to Rospendowski and resident Judith Vincent (Evans got her iPad shortly after the event), and employees of tech company Salesforce came out to help with the new devices.

The three women, plus two more Curry clients, were the advance guard of the pilot, which officially begins this month. None had ever used a wireless device to track their health, and their computer expertise ranged from rank beginner to pretty savvy.

Rospendowski and Evans grabbed at the chance to participate.

"I was really curious about the iPad, and I've always reached out to things I thought would help me," says Rospendowski, 65.

### 'I WAS VERY, VERY SICK'

Born in San Francisco and raised in Redwood City, she was a successful small business owner and mortgage broker in Sebastopol when overwhelming health care costs for her ill mother, fallout from the 2008 recession and foreclosure of her home put her out on the streets. Her four adult children lived far away, and only one knew of her plight as she moved from shelter to shelter for two years, struggling with alcoholism, PTSD from childhood traumas, heart problems and blackouts.

"I was very, very sick," she says. "I couldn't walk more than a few steps and could barely put a sentence together."

She was in a wheelchair the day she went to Homeless Connect, the Public Health Department's resource for linking the homeless with housing and other services, and stopped by Curry's information booth. Within three months, she was a regular at the Curry clinic and, when an apartment opened up in 2012, she was next in line.

Evans, 68, also saw the iPad program as one more chance to improve her life.

"I needed something to motivate me to literally get up and walk," she says. "I suffer from depression and I was fighting it myself. The iPad makes me conscious of what I have to do."

Evans, too, spent years homeless before moving into her Curry apartment. She grew up in Detroit and, at 17, left home for Dallas. It was 1963, with the civil rights movement in full swing. Evans became an activist, was jailed for demonstrating for the Congress of Racial Equality and soon moved on to union organizing. By 25,



PHOTO MARJORIE BEGGS

Diane Evans shows the Pulse monitoring device that registers her heart rate and other vital signs.

**"I needed something to motivate me to literally get up and walk."**

Diane Evans  
CURRY RESIDENT

she was a single mother living in New Orleans, working as a construction laborer, a job she did for 30 years.

She was living with her daughter, who worked for an airline, and grandson when Katrina hit in 2005, flooding their home. They managed to get to the Bay Area, where they stayed with families taking in hurricane refugees, then rented an apartment on the Peninsula. But when her daughter's job took her to Houston, Evans stayed on, tried to make the rent, failed and stayed with friends until that was no longer an option. Then came two years of living in her car and in shelters.

Evans sees herself as strong, a survivor, she says, but the trauma of New Orleans and homelessness left her with chronic health and mental health problems.

"Curry really was a lifesaver," she says.

### DUTCH GET PROMISING RESULTS

Models for the Curry pilot are two programs in the Netherlands. In one, several thousand socially isolated seniors got computer tablets and one-on-one coaching two hours a week for three months. Results show overall health and nutrition improvement and less need for nursing attention; 51% of participants reported feeling less lonely and 63% say they felt less vulnerable. The other program followed 3,600

poor people of all ages for several years and found improved health and lower costs when self-monitoring was linked to professional care.

The plan here in San Francisco is to start small — 15 tablets and the fixings for Curry residents — and think big. An April press release said the goal will be to expand the program to 250 isolated seniors in the Tenderloin in three years and, eventually, to 4,800 of the TL's "14,000 seniors who live alone."

That's an ambitious goal, concedes Tod Thorpe, Curry development director. "But we feel confident that with the funding it could expand to that level because the need is there." Leveckis' foundation donated the first three iPads, and Leveckis and Curry intern Angela Di Martino, who's working on a master's degree in integrated health studies at California Institute of Integral Studies, are training the first senior users.

Withings, a tech company with offices in Boston, Paris and Hong Kong, donated 20 weight scales and a monitoring device called the "Pulse." Both depend on WiFi to operate. Participants can wear the Pulse on their wrist, carry it in a pocket or clip it on; it measures the number of steps they take, calories they burn, hours of sleep and heart rate. That info displays on the device itself and links to an app for the iPad donated by the Dutch tech firm Cubigo. The users click on the app to check their progress.

Leveckis spent many hours, all pro bono, to get the pilot to this point, including helping Curry apply for a Google Impact Grant to purchase more iPads so all Curry residents and a few nonresident clients could participate in the pilot, if they wished. Curry didn't get the grant, but an anonymous donor stepped up with \$10,000 to buy the iPads, which Curry began distributing in September. For now, the pilot's iPads belong to Curry and are loaned to participants, but that might change.

"We may use them as an incentive reward for some health achievements in a later stage," says Leveckis.

The "think big" of the pilot will start in January.

"I feel protective of the project and don't want it to be diluted," Knego says. "Angela, with her strong social connection to the seniors, has been its heart. Her internship's over in December, and we hope to hire her to coordinate it. I will find funding." He expects the pilot to run until the end of March.

Leveckis has begun interviewing the handful of participants about how they're using their iPads and health-related or social changes they've made — walking more, eating less, communicating more with relatives. His findings will be key to getting more funding. The major expense, iPads, start at around \$300 for the smallest; the Pulse retails for \$120 and the scales \$150.

Recruiting enough volunteers to train tablet users also is essential, though that should be a no-brainer in



PHOTO MARJORIE BEGGS

tech-heavy San Francisco, Knego says: "Those would be really meaningful opportunities for high-tech companies."

Thorpe says they've got Twitter, Zendesk and other tech firms on their radar and will ask them to volunteer, possibly before the pilot ends.

Rospendowski and Evans demonstrated their skills on their iPads. Both had to get used to the device's super-sensitivity to touch, they said, but for now, Rospendowski is the more assured user. She owns a cell phone and aging laptop and volunteers at Curry's computer lab. She keeps a list of her 11 medications on the iPad, clicks on the Pulse to monitor how many steps she's taking daily and gets on the scale "most of the time." WiFi does the rest, registering the results on the Cubigo app. She Skypes and emails with her daughter, plays a few games and has joined a new Cubigo forum that tracks how much water she's drinking — staying hydrated is a major problem among seniors.

Rospendowski also goes to Zumba classes four times a week — that's when the number of steps registering on her iPad shoots up — and then there's Lolli, a service dog she got earlier this year, who "brightens my day, drags me out of bed like she's saying, 'Let's go.'" And cuddles with her when she uses her iPad.

"It's really one miracle after another," Rospendowski says.

Evans, too, has come far. "I want to learn computers because the whole world's on them," Evans said in a video made at Curry last



PHOTO MARJORIE BEGGS

Linda Rospendowski, 65, clockwise from top left: with Lolli at her side, checks her new iPad in her room at the Curry Residence. Derek Harte (left) is tutored during the April project launch by Salesforce employee Mark Sichel. Diane Evans, 68, homeless for several years, uses her new iPad in her Curry Senior Center apartment to keep track of her health and ease her depression by keeping connected through the Internet. Amsterdam Mayor Eberhard van der Laan (left) with Curry Center CEO David Knego. Rospendowski's service dog, Lolli, sprawls next to Rospendowski's iPad that shows she's taken 29,503 steps since the last time she looked.

year. "The world's speaking a language I don't know anything about, and I want to be part of that discussion."

Today, she proudly carries around her iPad and seems amazed at her progress.

"I knew nothing at first — I didn't even know app meant application. I did try the lab here but it frustrated and depressed me."

The iPad, with its portability and more intense training, is different. She monitors her heart rate, is learning to do email, checks on what's happening in the world and looks up recipes.

"Of course I cook in my room," says Evans, who has a two-burner stove and microwave as well as a toaster oven. "The last things I looked up on the Internet were Chinese rib



PHOTO COURTESY OF CURRY SENIOR CENTER

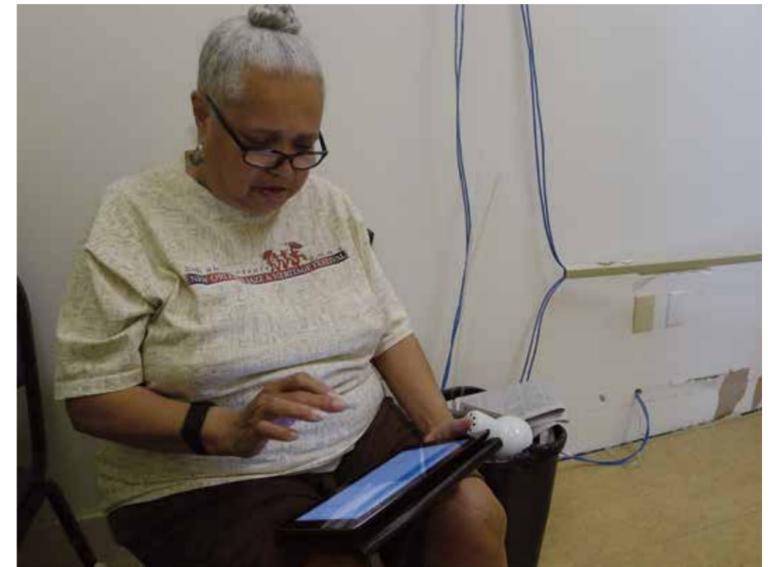


PHOTO COURTESY OF CURRY SENIOR CENTER



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sauce and carrot soufflé — I made that in the toaster oven. And I had weevils in my pasta. I looked that up, too."

She's determined to use her iPad mostly to keep getting healthier. She's managed to go from prediabetic to nondiabetic and is trying to strengthen "all the working parts," anticipating a hip replacement next year.

Evans has experienced one problem with her iPad that must be sorted out: inconsistent WiFi in her building. Leveckis says the access point is in the lab, two floors down, and distance and building materials are weakening the signal in her room.

"Diane has only minimal WiFi

now," he says, "enough for the weight scale occasionally but not much more. I'll try a new power line next but, in the end, there will be a solution, even if we have to drag an ethernet cable outside, over the roof."

The practical, appealing idea of the iPad pilot is to give seniors a personal, high-tech device they can use in their rooms and apartments.

So how does Evans check local and world news? She's nothing but a trooper: To get connected, she takes her iPad downstairs to the community room or, most often, sits on the stairs at the end of her hall. And, she says, she loves every minute of it. ■