

Sensors designed to enhance safety, privacy

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Opportunity Manor starts pilot program

by Dennis Dalman

Opportunity Manor of Sartell is about to embark on a year-long pilot program that - among other things - will electronically monitor residents' pulses and temperatures while they're sleeping, notify staff if patients wander away from their homes and even send an alarm signal if one of them should fall out of bed.

The pilot program starts in January.

Opportunity Manor is a non-profit housing organization for people with a variety of disabilities, from moderate to serious. Currently, its outpatient service, known as "Lifetime Opportunities," involves disabled people living in 17 converted single-family homes in the greater St. Cloud area, including the cities of St. Joseph, Sauk Rapids and St. Cloud, Sartell.

The pilot program is known as WellAWARE Systems, the leading developer of next-generation wellness-monitoring solutions for care providers. The service is based in Charlottesville, Va. Although at first the system might sound like a "Big Brother" invasion of people's privacy, its actual goal is to gather and report daily wellness information to enhance individualized quality care and to make it more efficient and cost-effective, according to Regan Stommes, chief executive officer of Opportunity Manor. It will also, once it is further perfected, allow resident patients to enjoy far more privacy than they have under a 'round-the-clock staff system. For example, many residents must be accompanied by a staff person when they go to the bathroom, which can be embarrassing for clients. The WellAWARE system can monitor clients while they are in the bathroom in case they fall down or confront other kinds of problems.

Manor's partnership with WellAWARE Systems is expected to bring even more innovations to the monitoring program. With the help of Manor staff, WellAWARE can learn exactly what kinds of monitoring methods are needed, based on the needs of residents and staff.

With the WellAWARE system, there are no cameras or audio-recording equipment, Stommes noted. The entire system is done with electronic sensors. Some of them are within a pad under a resident's sheet. Some are on the floors of rooms, hallways or other areas. The sensors are so sensitive they can easily tell if a noise means someone has fallen out of bed or if an object has fallen from a dresser top.

So far, the sensors cannot determine which resident within a group home is, for instance, leaving the home - say - in the middle of the night. However, WellAWARE is trying to perfect such a system so the sensors can be individualized person to person, Stommes noted.

WellAWARE also has the capability to beep residents if they've forgotten to take their medications - or alert staff of the same thing. The sensors can tell when a medicine cabinet is opened when it is not supposed to be.

Currently, at Manor's 17 homes, there is a 'round-the-clock staff member staying at each home. In some homes, they can sleep over; but in others a staff member must stay awake throughout day and night. The new monitoring system, Stommes said, would allow staff, in some cases, to be in their own homes with a pager system in case of an emergency. Those, of course, would be homes in which the residents are fairly independent in their daily living.

Ultimately, once monitoring systems like WellAWARE are perfected, a lot of money could be saved in care-settings, allowing more people (either disabled and/or elderly) to remain living semi-independently without having to go to expensive nursing homes. Stommes said the federal governments and state governments are very interested in developing such state-of-the-art technology not just to save money but to enhance safety and privacy issues for residents or institutional patients who require care.

"WellAWARE Systems," Stommes said, "could easily become a powerful prototype for other non-profit care-giving agencies in Minnesota and across the nation."



The WellAWARE System is comprised of a variety of sensors in a resident's living quarters. They include impact sensors, humidity and motion sensors, door and threshold sensors and other types of sensors designed to enhance a client's safety and ability to live independently or semi-independently. Opportunity Manor in Sartell is partnering with WellAWARE for a year-long pilot program, which is expected to help fine-tune and bring even more innovations to the system.