

Opinion: SilverSource launches seniors into cyberspace

By Michael Carlo



SilverSource recently hosted a pilot digital program for seniors at Willard Manor, a senior housing complex in Stamford. The program was funded by a grant from the Southwestern CT Agency on Aging & Independent Living.

If you are like me, sometimes you experience some negative self-talk and question whether you matter in life. For me, I get these little whispers of self-doubt when going through some difficult life events such as unforeseen career changes, relationship stresses, or even some positive experiences such as becoming an empty-nester (our children needing us less can really impact our self-perceptions). While I can snap out of it, questioning whether I matter is a lens that caps enjoyment and impacts relationships as well as my feelings of self-worth.

Why am I sharing all of this? Well, I had an experience recently with a group of people who also felt they didn't matter, and it absolutely impacted their mental health, until one local organization showed them otherwise.

The smiles were what hit me first. After walking into a community room affectionately called the Bird Room at Willard Manor, a senior housing complex in Stamford, I was greeted warmly by the residents who recently graduated from a pilot digital education program put together by SilverSource, a nonprofit organization whose mission it is to help older adults in our community and funded by a grant from the Southwestern CT Agency on Aging. The men and women I met were so excited to talk about their new digital skills that I could barely introduce myself before someone shouted out, "I can now order groceries online," which, if you think about it, is a big deal for older adults who have limited mobility with few family and social supports who are still living in the COVID era.

This program was SilverSource's response to the connectivity crisis for older adults, which has been highlighted by the pandemic. The COVID era has brought into stark focus the fact that 40 percent of

older adults in the United States don't have access to digital tools and/or the knowledge of how to use them. While many of us were able to use online platforms for Telehealth, shopping, and video-conferencing to attend doctor's visits, buy groceries/necessities, and socialize with friends/family, too many older Americans couldn't while they needed to stay home to stay safe. They couldn't even sign up for the vaccine without an email address! As a result, this extremely vulnerable segment of our population felt so isolated that many began to believe they didn't matter and, as a result, experienced increased loneliness, anxiety, and depression. In short, they felt left behind during a time when they needed connection most of all.

SilverSource's program provided residents at Willard Manor with their own laptops on condition that they fully participate in a 14-week training program.

The curriculum included how to use the laptop and connect to Wi-Fi, open the browser, cyber-security, and online safety tips, how to establish an email account and use it, how to use video conferencing applications, how to use Telehealth and access health portals and medical information, and instruction for online shopping, banking, the library, news outlets, and programs offered by the Stamford Senior Center. As part of the program, SilverSource also expanded existing Wi-Fi at Willard Manor.

A resident in the program told me she always got the feeling older adults are always the last ones on the totem pole when it comes to technology. When she found out they were part of a SilverSource pilot program, it made her feel good to know they were the first to participate. Additionally, she was overjoyed they did so well that the program was expanding to other buildings.

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Opinion: **Dear #seniors, you matter!**

SilverSource launches seniors into cyberspace

By **Michael Carlon**

Michael Carlon is an author and the founder of The Perennial Marketing Group, a marketing agency with a focus on adults 65+.

“It showed that they appreciated us.” SilverSource helped them embrace the notion that they matter!

A pre/post survey conducted by Silver-Source as a qualitative measure of program success shows that while only 25 percent of participants were comfortable using a computer prior to participating in the program, 100 percent felt comfortable afterwards. Additionally, just under half of participants were using email prior to the digital education program but now nearly all of them — 93 percent — are using email to communicate.

“We’ve heard of participants using the DMV website to renew their driver’s license and one gentleman is now able to buy his groceries online — from Grade A Markets, his preferred grocer” said Kathleen Bordelon, CEO of SilverSource and a cheerleader for this program. **“Someone with limited manual coordination due to the progression of MS is now able to use voice to text to help communicate. We are not only bringing older adults into the digital age, but we are also improving their quality of life.”**

Participants agree that becoming more self-reliant with regards to technology is boosting their self-esteem. One resident told me, *“Anytime I wanted to do something (on the computer), I had to ask my grandson. Now I am more self-sufficient.”*

In addition to being able to interact with their health care providers through telehealth and receiving test results electronically without having to wait for a doctor to call, participants are excited about having the opportunity to continue to learn new things. One participant told me, *“It gives us something to look forward to. Now I have an opportunity to learn something new each day. It’s good to build your mind and keep your brain active. It just builds your character.”*

Just as I had to have someone show me how and why I matter, these older adults had to learn they matter in the digital age. By giving them access to technology and teaching them how to use it, SilverSource has shown a group of older adults that they are not unseen. This group, largely underestimated by others, rose to the occasion and are embracing their newfound skills. To that I say, well done, SilverSource. You keep bringing home gold for the silver set.

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