

Microsoft Showcases Assistive Technology for Seniors

New York and other cities are working with Microsoft to bring computers, Webcams, and other high-tech gear to the homebound elderly

By [Suzanne Robitaille](#)

Not even the vibrancy of the city that never sleeps could get lifelong New Yorker Milton Greidinger to leave his home. Chronic illness kept Greidinger, 86, from participating in outside activities. Loneliness set in. "I was just waiting for my time to finish," Greidinger says.

Now Greidinger, a former department store salesman, has revived some social interests with the help of a private-public partnership between Microsoft ([MSFT](#)) and the City of New York that introduces seniors to computer, video, and Internet technology in their homes. The program, known as the Virtual Senior Center, uses technology to fight social isolation and give older, homebound New Yorkers better access to community services.

Working with the Benjamin Rosenthal Senior Center in Flushing, Queens, Microsoft equipped a group of seniors, aged 67 to 103, with a range of technology gadgets and assistive technology to help them function.

For New York, as with cities facing budget shortfalls across the country, a private-public partnership may be a cost-effective way to deliver higher-quality services to a rapidly aging population. "We want to make New York City the most age-friendly city in the nation," says Marah Rhoades, Assistant Commissioner of New York's Department for the Aging.

Microsoft's model for urban seniors

New York City is home to 1.3 million seniors. About 20,000 need a range of services, from home-delivered meals to medicine dispensing. The city's 60-and-over population is set to jump 50% in the next 25 years, according to the Department for the Aging. In fact, the expected rise in the number of people 65 and older will outpace the total population increase in every state, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Redmond (Wash.)-based Microsoft can use such partnerships to bring its software and services to a wider range of customers. "Even in a large city like New York, people can feel alone," says Bonnie Kearney, director of marketing for trustworthy computing at Microsoft. "This is a model cities can use to help homebound seniors stay connected and keep contributing to their communities."

At no cost to themselves, participants received new in-home desktop computers running the Windows 7 operating system, touch-screen monitors, and broadband Internet service worth about \$20,000, not including support, social-work services, and some software. A small video camera and microphone lets seniors use Skype and video-chat applications to keep in touch with family and friends. Others use the computer to attend religious services virtually or watch videos via YouTube ([GOOG](#)).

At the Flushing senior center, Microsoft also placed two-way video cameras and monitors that let homebound seniors remotely take part in activities such as tai chi and painting, while interacting with instructors and classmates at the center. For seniors with vision, hearing, and physical disabilities, Microsoft adapted the virtual centers with assistive technologies and devices.

Ethel Warfield, 81, has failing vision and uses BigKeys, a keyboard featuring 1-inch keys. She found the standard QWERTY keyboard too confusing, so Microsoft brought her an enlarged ABC keyboard, which she finds more logical and easier to see. Warfield also uses Magnifier, a new feature in Windows 7 that enlarge portions of the computer screen as a magnifying glass might. Sometimes she uses a screen reader that reads text aloud. "I'm amazed at the technology," Warfield says. "It has totally changed my life."

300-plus senior centers in New York

In Florida, Microsoft and the City of Miami funded a program called eSeniors, which brought free computer training and the opportunity to purchase customized technology packages to learning hubs located in senior centers. In Boston, an initiative called Technology Goes Home provided community and school-based training and PC-purchase options for low-income families. More than 10,000 people have participated in the program to date.

Microsoft funded the project in Queens to demonstrate its viability to the City of New York. (Mayor Michael Bloomberg is founder and majority owner of Bloomberg LP, owner of BusinessWeek.com.) The company hopes that success will encourage city officials to outfit some of more-than-300 senior centers with the high-tech systems and also give Microsoft the opportunity to sell customized packages to other agencies that serve communities with special needs.

One challenge will be to keep the technologies up and running, especially in homes whose residents are unaccustomed to high-tech gadgets. All of the participants in the Virtual Senior Center are beneficiaries of New York City's Department for the Aging. [Selfhelp Community Services](#), which operates the Rosenthal Senior Center, says it's committed to making sure that participants adopt the technology and learn relevant computer skills, lest the gear collect dust in seniors' homes.

Greidinger says there's little chance of that happening to him. "All of a sudden, I'm wide awake. I'm alive again," he says. "I talk to people now and I'm getting more and more involved."

Suzanne Robitaille is a journalist and founder and publisher of [abledbody.com](#), a Web site covering assistive technology issues. She is the author of [The Illustrated Guide to Assistive Technology](#)