

## High tech in Norwell home provides independence for disabled

By John Laidler

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A local nonprofit is using cutting-edge technologies to enhance the independence of residents in a group home in Norwell for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and complex medical needs.

Road to Responsibility, the Marshfield-based organization that operates the residence, is completing a project to make it a “smart home” filled with high-tech devices that residents can employ to accomplish everyday tasks on their own.

The smart devices, primarily Amazon Alexa-enabled products, allow residents to perform functions ranging from turning on lights to raising blinds and activating vacuum cleaners through simple voice commands. They are complemented by new lower-tech devices that aid with eating, washing, and other routines.

Chris White, Road to Responsibility’s president and CEO, said the project grew out of a desire to improve the quality of life of the three women and two men who reside in the home. Three of the residents use wheelchairs.

“Over time these folks expressed a desire to be able to do more, simple things like controlling how much light they were getting in their bedrooms without having to get the staff to adjust the shades, turning on the TV, and being involved with activities like cooking,” he said. “So we explored what was possible and decided to create a smart home for them.”

Road to Responsibility provides supportive housing and other services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities across the south of Boston region.

The Norwell residence is among two group homes the organization maintains for clients who also need intensive medical care.

Over the past two years, Road to Responsibility has introduced smart technology at some of its other group homes, but the Norwell house is its first fully smart home. Grants from the Pilgrim Bank Foundation, the HarborOne Foundation, and the Doug Flutie Foundation covered the \$45,000 cost.

In addition to smart lights and blinds, the Prospect Street home features voice-activated televisions, microwaves, thermostats, hand dryers, and trash containers. There are also smart mirrors, robot vacuum cleaners, pens that read text aloud, mattress pads that monitor sleep, and even a voice-activated dancing Santa.

Additionally, residents have been outfitted with iPads, and smartwatches that allow staff to collect data on the individual’s health. Low-tech features include portion-controlled food dispensers, and spoons with weighted handles to help prevent spilling food.

The equipment has been gradually introduced over the last few months, with the final devices set for installation later in May, according to Kesha Garcia, Road to Responsibility’s as-

sistant vice president for residential services.

While they are still adapting to the technology, Garcia said she senses that the residents are excited by the new devices, noting that they are particularly enthused about having access to a new voice-activated video intercom system that allows them to communicate with staff when they are in different rooms.

“If you want to talk to a staff person in the kitchen, you just say, ‘Alexa, call the kitchen,’ she said, noting that avoiding the need for staff to routinely enter their rooms gives residents “a feeling of more control over their environment.”

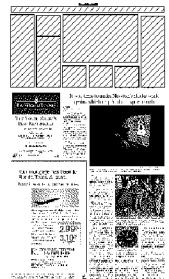
Empowering residents to be more self-sufficient in their daily activities also can benefit staff, White said, freeing up time they can devote to other responsibilities and enhancing their relationships with residents.

Encouraged by the results to date of its use of the new assistive technologies, Road to Responsibility is looking to introduce them over time at all of its group homes.

Garcia said at the Norwell home, she sees firsthand the sense of empowerment the technology gives to residents.

“They feel like adults that have control over what is going on in their lives,” she said. “To see the excitement in their faces, the joy at being able to do things we take for granted, is the best feeling.”

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