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High-tech solutions redefining 'disabled' Boston facility a leader in keeping focus on residents' quality of life

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Don Olivier can read books and the scientific journals he covets, though he has no control over his body from the neck down. Dianne Connor can send friends greeting cards and play Mahjong but has little control of her hands.

Olivier and Connor are residents of the Boston Home, a facility for people with progressive neurological diseases, primarily multiple sclerosis. The home has embraced technology as a way to give its 96 residents, all of whom use wheelchairs, dignity and independence - as well as pieces of the lives they had before they were disabled.

The home has a cyber cafe with computers that respond to voice commands, telephones that dial with a person's breath, and lifts to ease the transition from bed to chair.

Residents' wheelchairs, most of which are designed so they can operate them independently using their breath, chins or heads have magnetic strips that signal doors and elevators to open them.

"It keeps your mind off of everything you can't do," said Connor, a 10-year resident. Connor once spent time doing things with her hands, such as macramé or crewel work. Now, she spends a lot of time in the cyber cafe, e-mailing friends and family greeting cards, shopping online, and playing games.

An automatic lift in each room reminiscent of the revolving racks at a dry cleaner helps Connor, 61, feel more secure about transferring from her bed to her wheelchair. The lift has a T-bar to which residents are secured with straps. Without technology, "I wouldn't be able to get out of bed," she said.

For Olivier, 67, the home's emphasis on using technology to improve its residents' quality of life means he can keep in touch with the world outside his window. The computer in his room allows him to read books and magazines online, e-mail his



PROVIDED BY THE BOSTON HOME

Marva Serotkin, President and CEO of The Boston Home, with resident Janice Kushner.

daughters, one of whom lives in Spain, and see photographs of his granddaughter. He dials his telephone using his breath, puffing into a tube to get a dial tone, and then puffing to tell the phone which number to dial.

"It makes it a whole lot easier to be disabled," he said. "There are things I can do. I feel like I'm in touch with the world in a lot of ways I couldn't be if I didn't have this window looking out on it."

Focusing on the latest technology dovetails with the home's mission, chief executive Marva Serotkin said. The technology gives residents mobility, mental stimulation, access, and the ability to communicate. All of that helps combat the social isolation many with progressive illnesses feel, she said.

The home has recently entered into a partnership with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Age Lab to develop wheelchairs that would operate with voice commands. For example, to go to the kitchen, a resident would simply tell the chair to go there. The lab has developed a

prototype, but it's about a year away from being ready to test.

Eventually, the home's administration hopes to create a WiFi network for a nurses' call system and have a real-time resident locator system, both of which are steps toward providing remote control wheelchairs, said Don Fredette, the home's equipment technician.

"We need to do everything we can to make life better for our residents," he said. "The technology allows them to have some vestige of their former life."

The home's emphasis on technology is unusual in the world of long-term care, said Dorothy Northrop, research and clinical operations vice president for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society in New York. Indeed, other MS long-term care providers have come to the home to study its use of technology, she said.

"They are definitely a leader in this area," she said. "Because of the level of disability the residents have, it makes technology all the more crucial."