

[Re-]connected Seniors Program

COVID-19 and Its Impact on Seniors' Lives

During the global pandemic of COVID-19, the seniors living on our campus, just like the seniors living in the GTA and beyond, have been confined in their apartments and saw the opportunity of interacting socially with their peers and their family members dramatically limited.

The rationale behind *[Re-]connected Seniors* was informed by the fact that senior citizens are and will continue to be at increased risk of social isolation during COVID-19 with potentially long-lasting negative effects on their mental health. Immigrant senior citizens are at a further risk of social isolation, which negatively impacts both their health and their quality of life.

The Project

[Re]Connected Seniors is a way for families and friends to stay connected. The project was created by Villa Charities and funded in part by the Government of Canada's COVID-19 Emergency Community Support Fund, with funds administered by United Way of Greater Toronto.

From the end of October 2020 and until March 31, 2021, seniors living in our three apartment buildings (Casa Abruzzo, Casa Del Zotto and Caboto Terrace) were able to borrow a free iPad to discover new ways of staying in touch, learning, and socializing.

In an effort to connect the largest possible number of seniors, Villa Charities installed free internet in each common room of the apartment buildings and, in partnership with [Rogers](#), offered seniors living on low income an extremely low-cost internet connection deal.

The Workshops

With the aim of bridging the digital divide, Villa Charities has been offering online and in-person workshops (always following physical distancing guidelines and in strict compliance with the City of Toronto and provincial COVID-19 bylaws) in partnership with [TechServeTO](#), and with the invaluable help of several volunteers.

Small groups of seniors met once every two weeks in the common rooms of our residences to learn about a [variety of topics](#). Introductory workshops were organized to allow first timers to learn how to use iPads, create an e-mail address and use videoconferencing apps such as Zoom. Workshops were supervised by enthusiastic and professional instructors Sara Galli and Mohammad Jamali, multilingual and tech-savvy young scholars at the University of Toronto.

Off-campus

The project caught the eye of the community and numerous inquiries were made by off-campus residents to be part of the project. A limited number of iPads were lent to members of the outside community as a pilot initiative aiming at testing the possibility of extending the positive effects of the project to seniors living outside the Villa Charities campus.

Long-Term Residents of Villa Colombo

A small number of iPads were also lent to Villa Colombo Homes for the Aged Inc., a long-term care organization affiliated with Villa Charities, to help mitigate the effects of isolation within one of the most vulnerable groups of people in our community. These seniors were involved in our online and remote activities as well and learned how to connect with their friends and relatives.

For information about the project, please contact the Project Coordinator, Matteo Brera, at reconnect@villacharities.com or 416-789-7011 ext. 333

Watch our *[Re-]connected Seniors* recap video [here](#).

Testimonials

Aline Gudes, Resident at Casa Del Zotto

Thanks to Sara and Matteo's workshops introducing me to the world of Zoom, I could attend a virtual meeting at the French Embassy in Ottawa and a family birthday out of the country. I also enrolled in the French-speaking "groupe de lecture" at the Toronto Public Library, which hosts regular discussion groups between more than 30 people at a time. *[Re-]connected Seniors* dramatically improved the quality of my social life during the pandemic!

Bach Thi Benn, Resident at Caboto Terrace

Thanks to *[Re-]connected Seniors* I have become more confident in using technology. I didn't know much about how to use an iPad and communicate via Zoom. After following the workshops with Sara and Mohammad, I can use a tablet, send e-mail, use social media like Facebook and watch videos on YouTube! This helps me greatly to communicate with my relatives, friends and people around the world easily. Through Zoom I can access and fully enjoy the virtual meetings at the Vietnamese society. I also learned how to use Netflix to watch movies, listen to my favourite music on Spotify; now, I can even pay my bills, transfer money and all that from home. It is so convenient! I had a wonderful time attending the online workshops and I appreciated the time the volunteers and the instructors spent with me. I would like to thank all of them for their enthusiasm and the quality of their instructions. *[Re-]connected Seniors* made my life more meaningful and less lonely during the Covid-19 pandemic. It helped me keep me up to speed with the latest news and useful information. I feel I am more open-minded and enjoying my second youth!

Erlinita Cruz, Resident at Caboto Terrace

The virtual training offered by Villa Charities has been a great opportunity for all seniors, especially during this pandemic. Thanks to *[Re]Connected Seniors*, I was able to maintain a social life with my family and friends in our community. I could take care of financial issues in a timely manner. I was also able to reach the community's medical and social support. This training helped me achieve a more independent lifestyle and assisted me with my daily routine during such difficult and uncertain times.

Assunta Khan, Resident at Casa Abruzzo

I have been living at Casa Abruzzo for 4 years now. I have found it difficult to cope with being isolated in my unit because of the pandemic. I could only watch TV or read books but was lacking genuine interaction with other people and my relatives. It was not until *[Re-]connected Seniors* set me up with this wonderful iPad that I was able to experience some relief from my mental fatigue. I have since been able to search the internet for new recipes, discovered a virtual exercise program for seniors and play new interactive games (I love *Solitaire!*). It has been a lifeline during these unprecedented times. I want to thank everyone at Villa Charities, and especially Matteo Brera, for putting together this project. It is truly touching to know that there are people looking out for the physical and mental wellbeing of our senior community.

Daniel and David Marrello, Founders TechServeTO, Partner

TechServeTO, a federally incorporated non-profit, has partnered with Villa Charities since June 2020 to help deliver technology supports to older adults under care. TechServeTO's mission is to help teach older adults technology skills to help them fully function as members of the digital community. Villa Charities's *[Re-]connected Seniors* has been instrumental in teaching crucial skills such as video chatting, social media, business productivity, and more.

Sara Galli, Instructor, University of Toronto

Since the first workshop, many seniors showed a genuine interest in the initiative and were eager to learn how to use a technological device to keep in touch with their families. Most of them had never used a tablet before or were low in confidence when using one. Week after week, I have witnessed their skills growing and I could tell they were incredibly happy to come to our "class" to meet their classmates and the instructors. Every time I meet our seniors in class, they show so much pride in telling us that they were delighted they finally could call their relatives. I can still recall the emotions in the eyes of one of our Italian Canadian residents at Casa Del Zotto, he was able to see a picture of his nephews who live in Australia and whom he had not been able to see in person in the last 12 years. I feel incredibly privileged to have the opportunity to participate in the *[Re-]connected Seniors* project.

Mohammad Jamali, Instructor, University of Toronto

I find the experience of helping seniors improve their digital skills very enriching as it allows me to transfer my knowledge of technology to them now that they need it the most. It is very

gratifying when one sees their joy when they learn how to use their tablets independently and connect with their loved ones. I believe it is our responsibility to teach them how to stay connected now that the pandemic is physically keeping everyone apart.