

# united homecare, avus connect and simply

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In an era dominated by rapid technological advancements and a digital landscape that often overwhelms us, the communication needs of senior adults have taken center stage as a crucial and often overlooked aspect of their overall well-being.

As our society in general evolves towards full connectivity, it behooves us to first recognize and then address the unique challenges faced by our elders in staying connected with their loved ones, accessing vital information, and navigating the intricacies of modern communication platforms.

Recently, two leading South Florida-based senior care providers came together to do precisely that. Simply Healthcare (SH), a Florida-licensed health maintenance organization (HMO), joined forces with United

HomeCare® (UHC), a non-profit 501(c)(3) charitable organization and licensed provider of comprehensive home care services for homebound older adults, and its student-led, inter-generational senior assurance program, AVUS Connect® and AVUS Tech Pals® joined forces to tackle senior adults' communication needs, exploring the ways in which technology, community support, and personalized approaches can contribute to foster meaningful connection and enhance the quality of life for this often overlooked and underestimated segment of the population.

tablets to link seniors with the world

During a special community outreach breakfast held at the Village of Alla-

pattah YMCA Family Center, Simply Healthcare announced its support for UHC's AVUS Connect® and AVUS Tech Pals® project with a symbolic check for \$150,000. These funds are earmarked for the purchase and distribution of digital handheld devices specifically designed for older adults.

**"We are firm believers in the power that technology has to connect our patients with the outside world, especially with our amazing home health aides and volunteers because we have been witnessing its confidence- and health-boosting influence."**  
**Carlos L. Martinez, President/CEO, United HomeCare®**



During the community outreach event at the Village of Allapattah YMCA Family Center, Crisly Castaneda, Simply Healthcare's Senior Director of Marketing and Community Outreach (center) delivered a symbolic check with her company's generous \$150,000 donation to United HomeCare's President and Chief Executive Officer, Carlos L. Martinez. In this photo, members of the Simply and UHC teams are joined by residents of the Village of Allapattah who later that morning received AVUS Connect® pre-programmed digital tablets.

# healthcare: working to keep seniors connected



TABLET PHOTO  
COURTESY OF CLARIS COMPANION

The Samsung 4G tablets work with the easy-to-use, senior-oriented platform named *Claris Companion*, which includes Wi-Fi, enabling the user to *safely* access the internet to:

- Communicate with family, friends, caregivers, healthcare providers, and others on a secure contact list, via email, text messaging and one-touch video calls.
  - Engage in their favorite pastimes and hobbies, such as
    - Play online games;
    - Watch videos, news and weather reports;
    - Visit websites to read articles and books; or
    - Research topics of interest.
  - Manage daily activities like:
    - Store photos;
    - Maintain a calendar of significant dates and appointments;
    - Get medication reminders;
    - Follow exercise classes;
    - Participate in wellness surveys;
    - Check-in with caregivers and healthcare providers;
    - Receive relevant alerts and more.
- Most importantly, explains Blanca

Ceballos, UHC's Community Relations Manager and AVUS Connect mentor, is the level of security that the system provides.

"That is everyone's major concern when dealing with the internet today," she says, "but these

devices have enhanced security measures that not only block spam, scams and viruses, but also help the users and their families or caregivers retain control over who or what can be accessed through the device.

"To maintain this safe environment, the patient can communicate solely with people on his/her contact list," Ceballos adds. "And in turn, designat-

ed family members or caregivers can remotely manage and monitor the tablet's activity from anywhere via their own mobile devices and the 'family console' app by Claris Companion."

Blanca Ceballos added that, while operating the device will likely take some light training—and UHC/AVUS Connect® and AVUS Tech Pals® volunteers will be on hand to help—most seniors take to the tablets like "ducks to water," especially after they discover

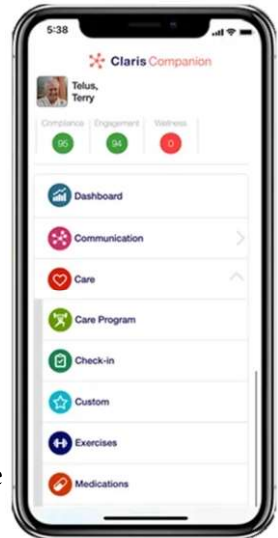


PHOTO COURTESY OF CLARIS COMPANION

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Partial view of the event audience. These older adults, area residents and Simply Healthcare/UHC patients, are enrolled in the AVUS Connect®/AVUS Tech Pals® program and will receive a device. United HomeCare® partners with YMCA, which provides support for the community's seniors with a myriad wellness programs, social activities and in this case, training them to use their new tablets.



what they can do with it.

Clarís Companion has an excellent support service as well.

## commitment to the program

Carlos L. Martínez, President and CEO of United HomeCare®, voiced his company's commitment to the AVUS Connect senior tablet initiative during the event.

"In UHC's 50-year history, our home health aides, nurses and supervisors have witnessed the effect that loneliness and isolation have on our elderly patients, which are extremely detrimental to their mental and physical wellbeing. The UHC teams work on a daily basis to help our community's seniors live and thrive at home. We see the impact these devices have on their lives! The improvement is visible from Day 1. These tangible, measurable results only strengthen our resolve and commitment to this program."

Simply Healthcare's generous donation will expand the senior tablet project in Miami-Dade County beyond its current phase with funding hundreds of devices in addition to the training and continued support efforts provided by AVUS Connect®, its student-led group of volunteers, and AVUS Tech Pals®.

Alina Palenzuela, UHC's Chief Marketing and Volunteer Engagement Officer, described the genesis of the program: "It was during the 2020 COVID pandemic, as our teams were caring for patients despite the shutdown, that we noticed the progressive damage that isolation measures were causing among the elderly."

UHC then introduced the use of hand-held tablets to encourage and facilitate increased communications



Cristy Castaneda, Senior Director of Marketing and Community Outreach, (left) and Melissa Jorge, LTSS Program Director, both representing Simply Healthcare Plans.

**"My hope for the program is to see the outcome of these seniors and how they improve their mental health, ease their loneliness and isolation, see them engaged with family members. It's so important to stay active, which gives you hope that you're not alone."**

**Cristy Castaneda, Sr. Director of Marketing & Community Outreach, Simply Healthcare**



Above: Blanca Ceballos, UHC's Community Relations Manager and AVUS Connect® mentor, greets attendees.  
Below: Emilia Solano, Assoc. Vice President of Community Health Strategies at YMCA of South Florida, and Alina Palenzuela, Chief Marketing & Volunteer Engagement Officer at UHC.



with patients. The initial phase was modest, yet immensely successful.

"We are firm believers in the power that technology has to connect our patients with the outside world, especially with our amazing home health aides and volunteers because we have been witnessing its confidence- and health-boosting influence for the last three years!"

United HomeCare® has developed the project with strategic support from two important partners:

- Community Care Corps (C3), a national program that fosters innovative local models in which volunteers provide non-medical assistance to family caregivers, older adults, or adults with disabilities in order to maintain their independence; and
- the Alliance for Aging, a private, not-for-profit agency—designated by the State of Florida as the *Area Agency on Aging* for Miami-Dade and Monroe counties—that helps older adults and individuals with disabilities stay at home and avoid placement in nursing homes.

## bridging the intergenerational gap

Yet while the tablets certainly expand seniors' interactivity with the world beyond their homes, it is important to highlight the work done by a corps of volunteers: the young AVUS Connect® crew, local high school students who enthusiastically contribute long hours to establish and strengthen intergenerational ties—friendships, really—with elderly patients, further broadening their social horizons, and its equally altruistic and as the name states, technologically-inclined AVUS Connect Tech Pals®, a program funded by National Community Care

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# making the case for digitally- enhanced social connectivity for senior adults



As individuals age, the importance of maintaining strong social ties is increasingly evident, impacting various facets of their physical, mental, and emotional health.

Beyond the inherent (and obvious) human need for companionship, frequent and regular interactions with the world around them:

- Provide seniors with a sense of purpose,
  - Combat feelings of loneliness and isolation,
  - Contribute to their cognitive vitality,
  - Serve as a safeguard against mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.
- Additionally, strong social ties have

been linked to a lower risk of chronic diseases and can enhance longevity.

Recognizing the importance of social connectivity for senior adults becomes paramount as a first step in fostering a society that values the well-being of its aging population and seeks to create environments conducive to meaningful engagement.

Digital devices can offer numerous benefits to senior adults in terms of communication, social engagement, and overall well-being. Here are some advantages:

- Enhanced Social Connections: Digital devices enable seniors to connect with family and friends, regardless of geographical distances. Video calls, emails and social media

- Access to Information: The devices allow seniors to access news, information, and educational resources easily, updating them about current events, health information, and other topics of interest.
- Cognitive Stimulation: Engaging with digital devices, such as playing games, taking online courses, or using brain-training apps, stimulates the mind and keeps it active.
- Telehealth Services: Digital devices enable seniors to consult with healthcare professionals remotely; this is particularly beneficial for those with limited mobility or living in remote areas.
- Memory Aids & Reminders: Smartphones and tablets can be used to



**Social connectivity holds profound significance for senior adults, playing a pivotal role in shaping their overall well-being and quality of life.**

platforms can help reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness.

- Convenient Communication: Instant messaging, emails, and video calls provide seniors with convenient ways to communicate with others without the need for physical presence, especially valuable for those with mobility issues.

set reminders for medications, appointments, and other tasks; this can be especially helpful for seniors with memory-related issues.

- Entertainment & Hobbies: Digital devices offer a wide range of entertainment options, like streaming services, e-books, audiobooks, and

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## As we age, the importance of maintaining strong social ties becomes more evident, impacting our physical, mental, and emotional health.

online games, that make for a more fulfilling, enjoyable leisure time.

- **Photography & Memory Sharing:** Seniors can use digital devices to capture and share photos, preserving memories with friends and family, a meaningful way to stay connected to loved ones and reminisce about shared experiences.
- **Online Communities & Support Groups:** Seniors can join sites that cater to their interests or health conditions, allowing them to connect with like-minded individuals and share experiences.
- **Financial Management:** Digital devices can be used for online banking, bill payments, and financial management that help seniors maintain control over their finances without the need for physical trips to banks or offices.
- **Adaptive Technologies:** Most devices offer accessibility features, like larger fonts, voice commands, and screen readers, making it easier for seniors with visual or auditory impairments to use technology.
- **Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships:** Digital communication tools facilitate interactions between grandparents and grandchildren.

Video calls, online games, and other shared digital activities can help maintain and/or strengthen intergenerational bonds.

While these benefits are substantial, it's important to keep in mind that some seniors may face challenges in adopting and adapting to new technologies. Support, training, and user-friendly interfaces can help mitigate these challenges and make digital communication more accessible to older adults.

*For learn more about the AVUS Tech Pals® and AVUS Connect® programs, please call (305) 716-0710 or visit [AvusConnect.org](http://AvusConnect.org).*



whose members are 18 years and older, mostly from area colleges and universities.

AVUS Connect® was founded by Shawn Martinez, then a student at Belen Jesuit Preparatory School (Class of 2023), in 2020 as a community service project.

Inspired by a call to action to address isolation and depression among older adults and energized by his own close relationship with his paternal and maternal grandfathers, both widowed and negatively impacted by



**Shawn Martinez (left), founder of AVUS Connect®, and his father and mentor, Carlos, during a United Way awards ceremony recognizing the young man's innovative intergenerational project.**

the absence of their lifelong partners, Shawn developed a plan, sought advice from his school counselor, as well as his father and the UHC team, and then rallied his Belen classmates and their friends to participate.

"Avus" means grandfather in Latin.

The program, now beginning its fourth year, has expanded to connect with more South Florida seniors.

*For more information, please contact UHC at (305) 716-0710, [customercare@unitedhomecare.com](mailto:customercare@unitedhomecare.com). We also invite you to visit [UnitedHomeCare.com](http://UnitedHomeCare.com) and [AvusConnect.org](http://AvusConnect.org)*

*To find out more about volunteering with AVUS Connect® and/or AVUS Tech Pals®, please write [volunteer@avusconnect.org](mailto:volunteer@avusconnect.org)*