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## How telemedicine can keep elderly out of nursing homes

There is segment of the senior population who could potentially live more independently and not require expensive nursing home care if there were some way to monitor them effectively. A recent article on CNBC.com ([www.cnbc.com/id/101316376](http://www.cnbc.com/id/101316376)) reports on a group that is utilizing the fast growing field of telemedicine to protect frail elderly in senior living communities.

Lutheran SeniorLife, a faith-based non-profit in western Pennsylvania that runs senior living communities, re-located 24 nursing home residents two years ago to a low income senior housing complex as part of a pilot program. Lutheran SeniorLife has programs that participate in LIFE programs where Medicaid pays the group a flat fee to cover a resident's care. The LIFE program is designed to provide comprehensive medical care, adult day care, and home care to older adults with medical challenges. The goal is to keep people out of nursing homes, and keep them in the community safely. Lutheran SeniorLife is utilizing a system called the MobileCare Monitor to keep the more frail seniors in the community.

The MobileCare Monitor is made by AFrame Digital out of Reston, Virginia. It works by having the senior wear a sports watch-type health monitoring device that allows a caregiver to respond quickly if there is a fall. The system is secure and FDA cleared, and works by sending a text message to the caregiver's smart phone, and an alert to a web-based interface called a CareStation. The system is not inexpensive since it costs a few thousand dollars to install the CareStations, and each wrist monitor and subscription charge is approximately \$400. But for SeniorLife, for whom the flat fee for each participant does not nearly cover nursing home care, the cost is minimal. The satisfaction of keeping a resident in the community is high also. George Brett M.D. the medical director for the LIFE programs at Lutheran SeniorLife describes the cost of the MobileCare Monitor system as "peanuts" when compared to the cost of nursing home care. He also said that "We believe they [participants] are far better off in the community."

The telemedicine patient monitoring market is booming globally, as it grew from \$4.2 billion in 2007 to more than \$10 billion in 2012 according to Kalorama Information, a publisher of medical market research. Experts predict that this field will grow even more thanks to the Affordable Health Care Act which encourages accountable care. Accountable care standards judge medical providers on their effectiveness in treating patients and in preventing relapses of medical conditions. Remote monitoring can help avoid repeat hospitalizations and frequent physician office visits by checking on the patient's blood pressure, blood sugars, and medication compliance, among other things.

There continue to be obstacles to overcome, however. There is reluctance on the part of insurers to reimburse the costs, and HIPAA safeguards must be considered. Nevertheless, this is an exciting field that can allow seniors to "age in place" safely, and the chronically ill to be monitored more effectively and less expensively.