



Keeping tabs while keeping care

How one assisted living facility helps loved ones monitor residents

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updated 5:13 p.m. CT, Wed., Aug. 16, 2006

PORTLAND, Ore. - It's lunchtime in downtown Portland, and Susan Sloan wants to check in on her 94-year-old mother, Florence Westerhausen. From her desk at work, she logs onto a secure Web site and gets real-time information about her mom.

"She's in her bedroom," says Sloan as she watches her computer screen.

Westerhausen lives 10 miles away, at an assisted living home called Oatfield Estates. No long hallways or institutional lighting here — six homey houses make it feel like a community instead of a facility.

But what you can't see makes it even more unique. Nearly 1,000 hidden sensors are part of its high-tech approach to elderly care. The sensors work with a small black badge that residents can choose to wear. It keeps track of where they are and what they're doing.

"It tells us exactly where she's at," says Oatfield Estates employee Misty Tedford as she tracks a resident named Dorothy. "She's in the doorway of her room."

At night, when the residents aren't wearing their badges, they can still be monitored. Sensors attached to the bed sound an alarm if they get up. It's fondly called the bed bug.

About two-thirds of the 80 residents have dementia or Alzheimer's, and without the technology, many might have to be locked in their rooms. But not at Oatfield.

"That's really our dream," says Lydia Lundberg, the owner of Oatfield Estates. "The technology will help us manage the facilities but also give residents freedoms that they might not otherwise have."

Lundberg says members — anywhere in the world — can stay connected, simply by logging online.

"We have one family member in New Zealand," she says. "We have some in Arizona, Wisconsin."

And for the residents, like Florence Westerhausen, it can be a life-saver. When she took a nasty fall, her badge alerted the staff instantly.

"I think it saved my life, I really do," she says.

"The way they approach their care and the independence they give them is so critically important," says Susan Sloan.

Important, because for these seniors it's not about a place to live until the end of their lives, it's about the freedom to live life to the end.

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