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Service lets assisted-living residents enjoy 'virtual visit' with family

By: SHANNON WINGARD - For the North County Times

OCEANSIDE ---- Wilma Clarke, a resident of The Springs at Oceanside, was all smiles as she talked with her cousin in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Despite the distance, Clarke's cousin was able to see her smiles last week thanks to Family Virtual Visits, which allows residents at assisted living facilities and their loved ones to connect through live video.

The live-video visit took place at The Springs.

Clarke, who describes her age as a young "70-plus," said the virtual visits are a great way for her to catch up with her cousin, Betty Farrell, 55.

"I have known her since she was born, and this couldn't be better," she said.

When her cousin visited a couple of years ago, Clarke was sick and underweight, Clarke said. After their first virtual visit, Farrell cried after seeing how much better Clarke looked. Now, the cousins stay connected through weekly video visits that give them a chance both to talk and to see each other.

"We know each other's expressions," Clarke said. "When I see her, I know when something is wrong. When she sees me, she knows. It's a very great thing."

Merritt Widen, the chief executive officer of Family Virtual Visits, said his company began developing the technology in mid-2004 and launched its first virtual visit the day after Christmas last year.

Now, three assisted living facilities in California offer virtual-visits services, which are provided by Widen's Emeryville-based company. He said he expects to offer the service at about 18 more locations in California, Mississippi, Washington, and Missouri, over the next few months.

"We took a couple of years developing this for the senior market," he said. "What was so hard in developing this was making it easy."

At The Springs last week, Clarke was sitting in front of the television and talking while a camera and a microphone transmitted her end of the conversation to her cousin. She could see and hear her cousin as well.

Widen said clients and customers need to have a computer with high-speed or broadband Internet service and a web cam. After they sign up for the \$14.95 unlimited monthly service, they can schedule their visits on the company's Web site. Each visit lasts 15 minutes, although the visits can extend another 20 minutes as long as no one else has scheduled a visit for immediately after.

"The technology wasn't ready until recently," Widen said. "What really makes this work is the service."

The Springs began offering this technology in May, he said, and six people have signed up to use it so far.

According to Maria Tessitore, community relations director at The Springs, the service appeals to current and prospective residents.

"I've been working in senior housing for 11 years, and I have never seen this before," she said. "This is an opportunity for (the residents) to be connected to the world in an easy fashion."

The visits appear to be as important for loved ones as they are for the residents. According to Farrell, seeing Clarke was "long overdue."

"This is really great, because it makes a difference to see and hear her," she said. "It is really reassuring."