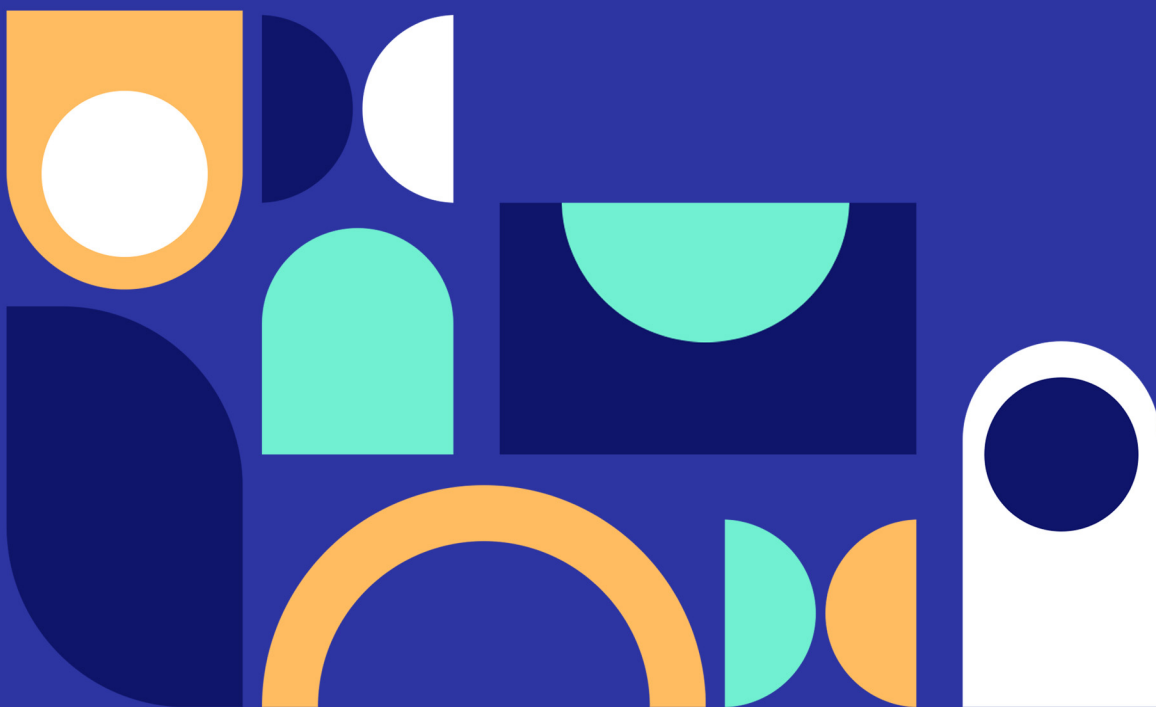


# Optimizing Family Engagement

Five Ways Senior Living Communities Can Build Trusting Relationships with Families

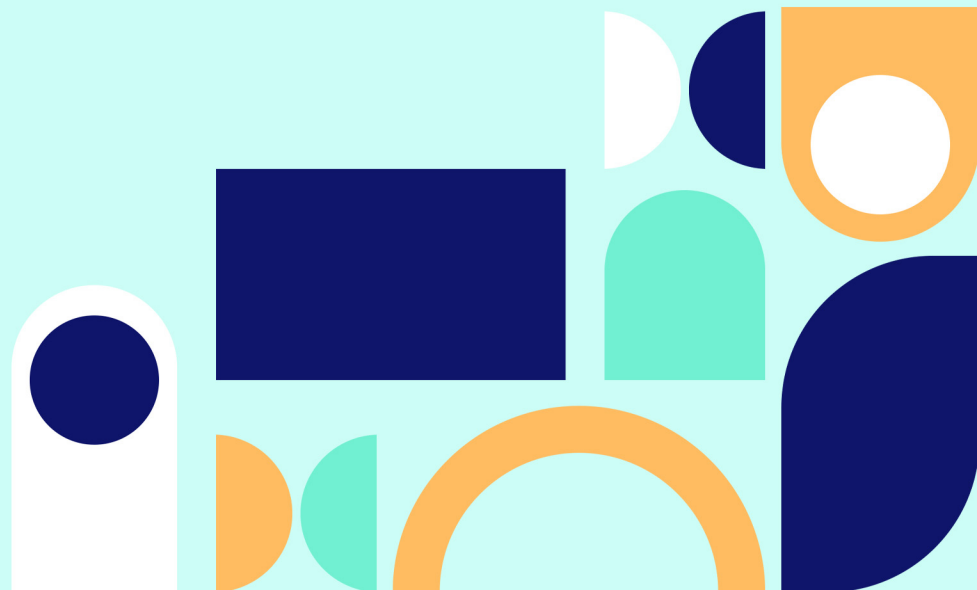


# Introduction

There are more than 8.3 million<sup>1</sup> residents in long-term care facilities across the United States, most of whom have adult children who have grappled with the realization that aging parents need the services provided by experienced caregivers. The decision to turn to long-term care is often taxing for family members. For many, the shift from primary caregiver to visitor happens in the blink of an eye and the adjustment can be difficult indeed.

One of the major challenges family members face is a feeling of disconnectedness, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Families that already felt out of reach were shut out completely. The pandemic accelerated the adoption of innovative approaches to communicating vital information with families in an effort to create long-lasting, strong relationships in a totally virtual environment.

In this white paper, we discuss five ways that long-term care facilities can use technology to open lines of communication to establish trusting relationships and promote peace of mind among family members.



# 1. Provide Transparency to Lift the Stigma

Families often put off putting their family members into long-term care because of the stigma attached to it. In a survey<sup>2</sup> conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, some respondents “expressed the feeling that in some ways, it is a sign of failure on the family’s part if they have placed a loved one in a facility.” This stigma, the report said, “may contribute to delays in beginning the search for and selecting a facility for a loved one.” One survey respondent said that nursing homes are taboo, even, saying, “It shows a failure of the family unit, not taking care of the elderly.”

One way to help family members feel confident and at ease is to promote transparency. Long-term care facilities can do this by communicating consistently with family members. By sharing information about daily activities, special events or even the weekly menu, long-term care facilities can provide a view from the inside, offering a glimpse of the daily life of their loved one.



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The research supports this: A 2021 study<sup>4</sup> about long-term care facility communications during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that family members felt “greater peace of mind when there were multiple communication channels” in place. It also revealed that “respondents had more negative perceptions of a facility when they were not informed about confirmed COVID-19 cases.” The study, published in the Journal of Gerontological Social Work, concluded that, “multiple communication channels and transparency about COVID-19 status were effective in keeping positive family perceptions about the facility.”

## 2. Foster Involvement and Connectedness

We've discussed how care facilities can share information to provide transparency. Now, let's look at how organizations can use communication tools to build relationships with family members – and why they should.

A recent survey<sup>5</sup> of family and staff members found that family caregivers perceived themselves to have a greater role in caring for relatives than that perceived by the nursing home staff. Either families overestimated their involvement, or staff underestimated family involvement in caring for residents in nursing homes. And that, “families in this study were more willing to help in nursing home care and were perhaps under-valued as a resource within the nursing home setting.”

This study suggests that families want to be involved in the care of their loved ones. Long-term care facilities can help create more involvement and connectedness by looping family members in as much as possible. The more relevant information long-term care facilities share with families, the better family members will feel.



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### 3. Embrace Omnichannel Communications

Communication today is omnichannel: phone, text, email, on-demand dial in. One way to open lines of communication is to share information using the method that family members prefer. It's important to give family members a choice: how would they like to receive their information?

Texting is becoming more and more popular among all generations and for good reason. 90% of all text messages are read within 3 minutes of being received<sup>7</sup>; Text messages are opened and read almost 138% more than emails are opened and read<sup>8</sup>; Mobile devices users place a premium on convenience. As such, users prefer texting over email or app notifications<sup>9</sup>.



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That's not to say that email and phone have been forgotten. It's important to remember that people consume information in different ways. The key here is preference. One size does not fit all, so plan your communications accordingly.



## 4. Promote Language Accessibility and Cultural Awareness

According to U.S. Census data, there are more than 350 languages spoken in the United States. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services notes that, for some residents, “Culture, language, and ethnicity are factors that affect the context in which consumers make decisions about nursing home care.” And, according to the Harvard Business Review, 56% of customers said that the ability to obtain information in their own language was more important than price.

While most long-term care residents and their families speak at least some English, communicating with family members in their native language displays cultural respect, which can go a long way to establishing trust. In short, translation matters.

But don't stop there. Cultural sensitivities go far beyond language.



An anecdote in the publication *Minority Nurse* drives this point home:

*Melissa Leung, RN, BSN, still remembers the day she encountered an elderly patient who was resisting her medication. The woman, a native of China, had balked when given her pills and a glass of cold water, and it was noted on her chart that she was “medically noncompliant.” Leung, who is fluent in Mandarin, gently spoke to the woman in her native language to determine why she was reluctant to take her medicine.*

*“Like many Chinese immigrants, she had been taught to drink hot water with meals,” says Leung, who works in the cardiac catheterization lab at Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia. “In China, some people are taught to boil water before drinking it to remove germs, and others believe that drinking cold water is bad for the stomach.”*

*Leung noted on her patient's chart that she preferred to take her medications with hot water. As a bilingual nurse, Leung was able not only to communicate with her patient in her native language, but also to provide culturally specific care by being sensitive and responsive to her patient's cultural beliefs and traditions.*

This story illustrates that providing a familiar environment goes beyond language. It gets to the heart at what it means to be at home.

## 5. Adopt New Technologies

Legacy communication processes such as mass emails and phone calls cannot meet the needs of today's long-term care facilities. The frequency and nature of communications requires a more robust and systematic method of communicating both routine and emergency messages to families.

VoiceFriend, a HIPAA compliant communication and engagement platform used by thousands of long-term care facilities throughout the US, enables organizations to send messages in the language and method that families prefer, including phone, email, text, and on-demand dial in.



Meera Rainer, COO of Nexion Health, said that once they implemented VoiceFriend, family satisfaction levels increased, "with 88% of families indicating they were "greatly satisfied" with Nexion's level of communications."

In 2021, more than 184,000 family members received more than 762,000 messages via the VoiceFriend platform. These messages included everything from COVID protocols to emergency alerts to activity updates. Meera Rainer, COO of Nexion Health, said that once they implemented VoiceFriend, family satisfaction levels increased, "with 88% of families indicating they were "greatly satisfied" with Nexion's level of communications."

# VoiceFriend Helps Long-Term Care Facilities Improve Family Communications

## Create a Communications Calendar

Easily create a communications calendar to ensure consistent interactions with family members. Messages are displayed by day, week, or month.

## Schedule Messages in Advance or Easily Send Them Ad Hoc

Important messages, such as emergency updates, can be sent via VoiceFriend immediately while routine messages, such as the weekly menu, activities, and status updates, can be scheduled in advance.

## Implement Omnichannel Communications

Create and send messages via text, phone, email, and on-demand dial-in. Each member of the family can choose their preferred communication method.

## Translate Communications

Family members simply select their language of choice and messages are automatically translated into 18 languages.

## Optimize for the Mobile Experience

Staff members can download the free VoiceFriend mobile app to quickly send messages to family members via their mobile devices.



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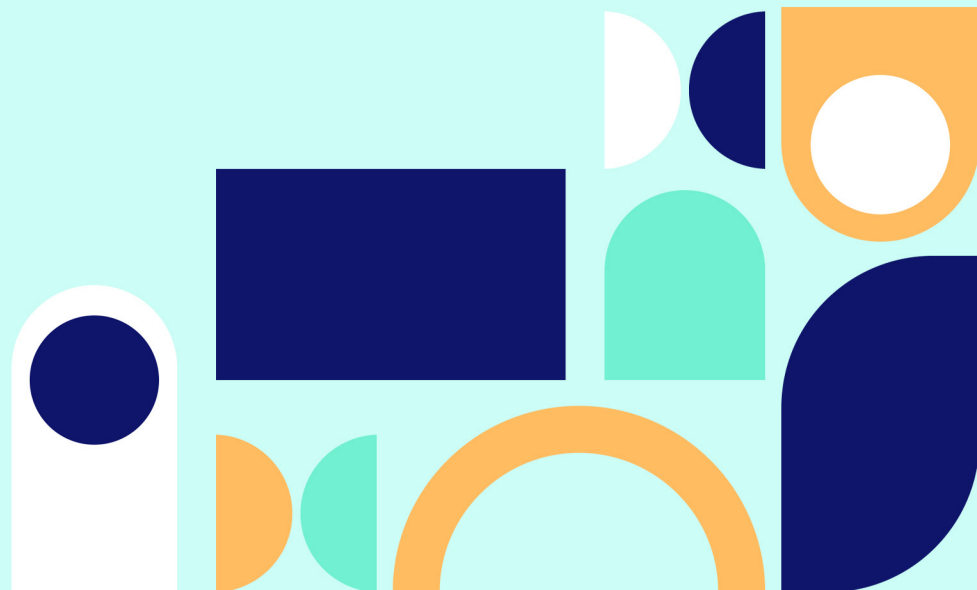


# About VoiceFriend

VoiceFriend is a HIPAA compliant, cloud-based communication automation and management platform designed for organizations that care for seniors. Since 2016, VoiceFriend has been committed to improving the wellbeing of residents, optimizing relationships with family members, and supporting staff.

Today, VoiceFriend is used by thousands of assisted living, independent living, skilled nursing, and PACE programs across the United States to help keep residents engaged and family members involved – every day of the week, every week of the year.

To learn more about VoiceFriend visit our website at [www.voicefriend.net](http://www.voicefriend.net).



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