



What is the problem?

By 2040, 20 percent of the total U.S. population will be 65 or older—that's more than 81 million people (U.S. Census Bureau). And today, 20 percent of Ohio adults are caregivers for an older loved one.

A serious nationwide shortage of direct care workers means older adults are having difficulty accessing the services they need to remain independent in their homes. Because of this, more family members are being called on to provide care for their loved ones—often on short notice and with little or no training.

Prior to the pandemic, the direct care workforce shortage was already impacting Council on Aging's (COA) ability to provide in-home care services. Also during the pandemic, many older adults and families receiving in-home care put those services on hold to limit their exposure to the virus. As a result, more direct care workers left the field.

COA has been seeking innovative solutions to offset the direct care worker shortage. Since family caregivers already play a critical role in our long-term care system, doing more to support this group was a logical step. COA developed EVRTalk in partnership with the Live Well Collaborative, an academic-industry innovation center at the University of Cincinnati.

What is EVRTalk and how does it help?

EVRTalk is a revolutionary Virtual Reality (VR) experience designed to help family caregivers feel more comfortable with their role. Participants wear a headset and are immersed into a complete environment equipped with digital conversations and graphics.

Through the use of VR—a technology originally developed in the gaming industry—EVRTalk helps caregivers build skills and confidence, while also presenting caregiving realities from both the caregiver's and the care recipient's points of view, helping to encourage empathy and understanding of what older adults may experience when being cared for.

There are five real-life caregiving scenarios built into EVRTalk.

1. Learning Medication Management
2. Starting the Conversation on Incontinence
3. Talking Down a Hallucination
4. What is Caregiver Burnout?
5. Having a Conversation About End-of-Life Wishes



Feedback and benefits of EVRTalk

“EVRTalk allows caregivers to ‘play,’” explains Anna Goubeaux, COA Caregiver Support Nurse. “They are able to make decisions and interact by choosing the path of the conversation. Depending on their response, they are able to see a positive or negative effect without it being ‘personal’ to them. They can learn what works best and what doesn’t.”

With caregivers who’ve been exposed to many aspects of a caregiving situation, older adults will receive more compassionate care. Relationships between older adults, their caregivers and family improve as empathy increases and stress decreases.

Through testing and community demonstrations, EVRTalk feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Almost all (91%) test participants said EVRTalk was useful compared to other caregiver training currently available. And 95 percent of participants agreed EVRTalk increased their awareness about challenges faced by older adults. Some of their comments:

- “I particularly liked being able to hear what it feels like to be someone like Don [a character in the EVRTalk experience who has dementia]. I would never have been able to do that without this.”
- “I learned how to approach things in a softer manner, using a direct question to get a direct answer isn’t always the right approach.”
- “It is good to have similar options, and it helped that there was a difference between the answers so you can learn how your word choices can impact the outcome.”

Future plans for EVRTalk

EVRTalk aligns with Council on Aging’s mission to enhance lives by assisting people to remain independent through a range of quality services. Most older adults want to remain independent in their homes and communities for as long as possible. One of the ways COA achieves this mission is by supporting family caregivers who play a critical role in helping their older loved one remain independent. COA’s future plans for EVRTalk include:

- 1:1 Caregiver Support: Integration into COA’s existing Caregiver Support Program to help people who are new to caregiving or who are experiencing challenging caregiving situations.
- Workplaces: COA will offer EVRTalk to local businesses/organizations that have employees who are struggling to juggle caregiving responsibilities – COA can offer EVRTalk as a training for these employee-caregivers. With training and support, caregiving employees will be less distracted by caregiving duties and therefore more engaged at work.
- Professionals: COA will partner with organizations that support caregivers (hospices, support groups, health care providers) to make EVRTalk available to their staff or caregivers as a training tool.

To learn more about EVRTalk: EVRTalk@help4seniors.org