

## Telehealth program expands in Westchester

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**P**am Leichtweis, a resident at the Low-Savin/Soundview Apartments at United Hebrew in New Rochelle, has her vitals taken just about every Friday. Twice a week, a Pace University student sets up a space in the community's activity room for routine medical tests: blood pressure, blood-oxygen level, pulse and weight.

The student puts the information into an online portal that is accessed by a team of nurses working remotely who regularly monitor the participants' health levels.

For the last two years, this has been a part of Leichtweis' weekly routine and a chance to mingle with some of the other 50 Soundview residents who participate in the Telehealth Intervention Programs for Seniors, or TIPS, initiative.

It never occurred to Leichtweis that one day these routine tests would be life-saving.

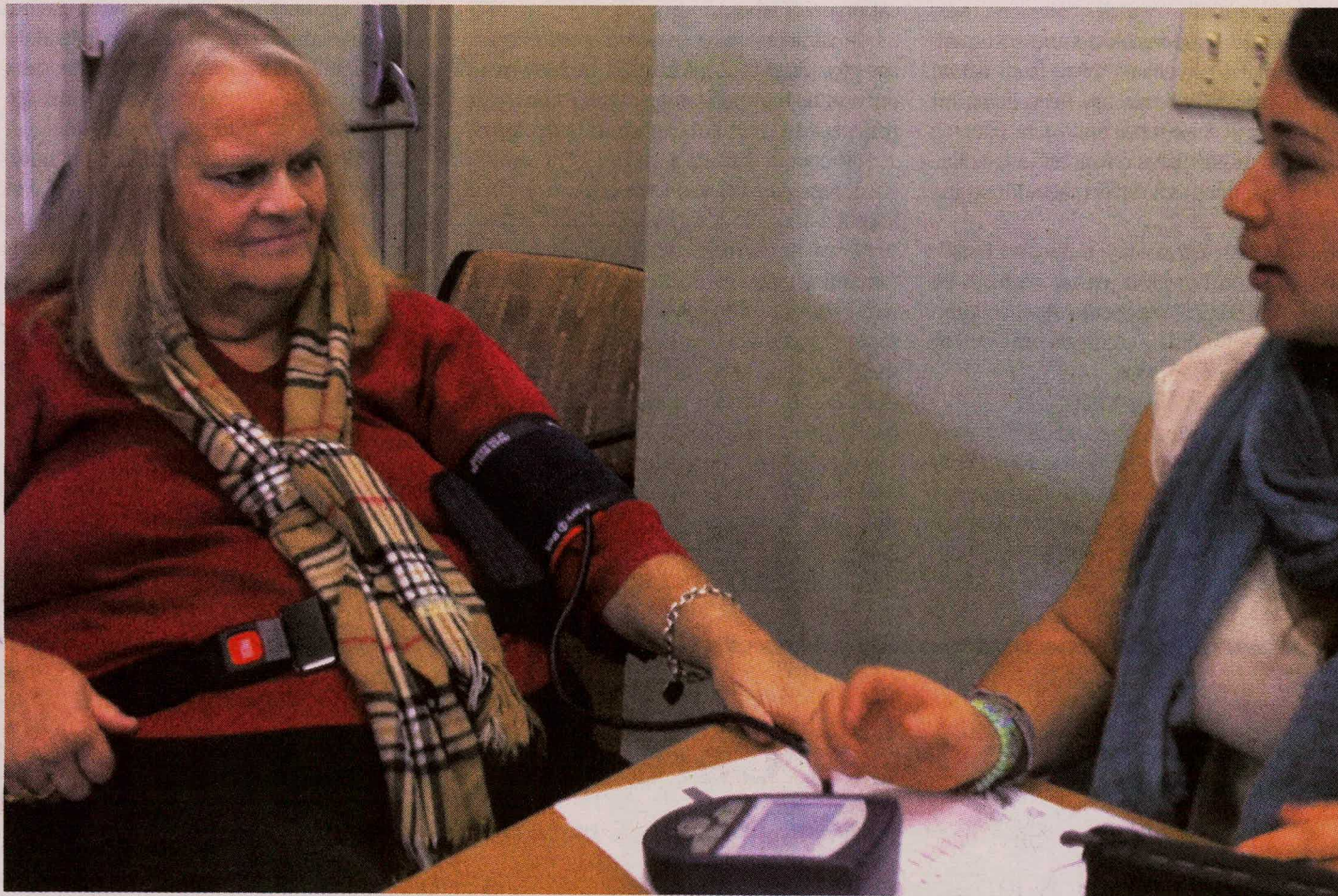
"One day I came down for the vitals, and my whole my body was swollen and I couldn't understand why. So they took my vitals and they said 'You have to call the doctor, your blood pressure is very low,'" Leichtweis said, adding that she had been warned for weeks by the TIPS nurses to call her doctor.

When she eventually did call, she said, the doctor told her to call 911. The emergency room doctor noticed the low blood pressure and detected that Leichtweis had an irregular heartbeat.

"They kept me there for a couple of days and they put me on medicine. I'm still on the medicine and I still run low (blood pressure), but not as low as it was," she said. "If TIPS didn't tell me what to do, I probably would have been gone, but TIPS helped me a lot to realize that I do have to call the doctor and I have to follow up on everything."

TIPS was developed out of a pilot program that was in part started at Soundview in 2013 between Pace University and Vital Care TeleHealth Services LLC, a White Plains-based company.

The concept for TIPS was adopted by the county and launched in summer 2014. It is offered free to participants in seven locations, mostly independent living complexes and senior centers, in Westchester County and has more than 500 people signed up.



Pam Leichtweis, left, enjoys the part of her day when a Pace University student like Raquel Dominguez, right, takes her vitals for the Telehealth Intervention Programs for Seniors initiative, which is offered at Low-Savin/Soundview Apartments at United Hebrew in New Rochelle.

The Westchester Public-Private Partnership Aging Services Inc. hired Vital Care as a subcontractor to expand the TIPS program to 10 locations in the county. The expansion will be facilitated by nearly \$1.4 million in grant money awarded to the Westchester Aging Services partnership spread out over three years from The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation.

Joanne Russo-Lanza, manager of the Soundview Apartments, said TIPS has been an ideal program for independent senior residents who may have trouble getting to the doctor regularly, but want to be proactive about their health.

"It's a great safety net in catching health issues that otherwise might have gone unmonitored, undetected," she said. "It gives them a sense of empowerment."

Russo-Lanza also said the residents really enjoy seeing their neighbors and talking

with the student technicians who do the vitals testing.

Recently on duty was Raquel Dominguez, who has interned for the TIPS program for two years. She is a senior biology major who wants to become a physical therapist.

The internship was perfect for her, she said, because she also enjoys the opportunity to interact with the participants each visit.

It's the kind of hands-on experience Dominguez wanted out of an internship, she said, as she wrapped a blood pressure monitor around a Soundview resident's arm.

In her experience as a TIPS staffer, Dominguez said there have been instances where participants have required immediate medical attention on the spot.

What makes TIPS a great program, she said, is that it "makes people more aware of their health."

Vital Care, which came up with the idea for TIPS and provides the technology and

nurse staffing – both registered nurses and nursing students – for the program, was co-founded by Chris Gaur, who graduated from Pace's Lubin School of Business in 2012.

"We saw a need in the health industry for cost-effective, remote health solutions," Gaur said. "We're more than just a technology company, because we do the technology but we also do the service delivery."

The concept of remotely monitoring patients' health has been around for 10-12 years, he said, but TIPS is unique in that it combines telehealth nursing and in-person clinical tests.

Combining the two concepts has allowed the company to develop relationships in the community and grow in technology, Gaur said.

Gaur said that as the program continues to expand, he hopes eventually it will become reimbursable through insurance companies, Medicare and Medicaid.

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