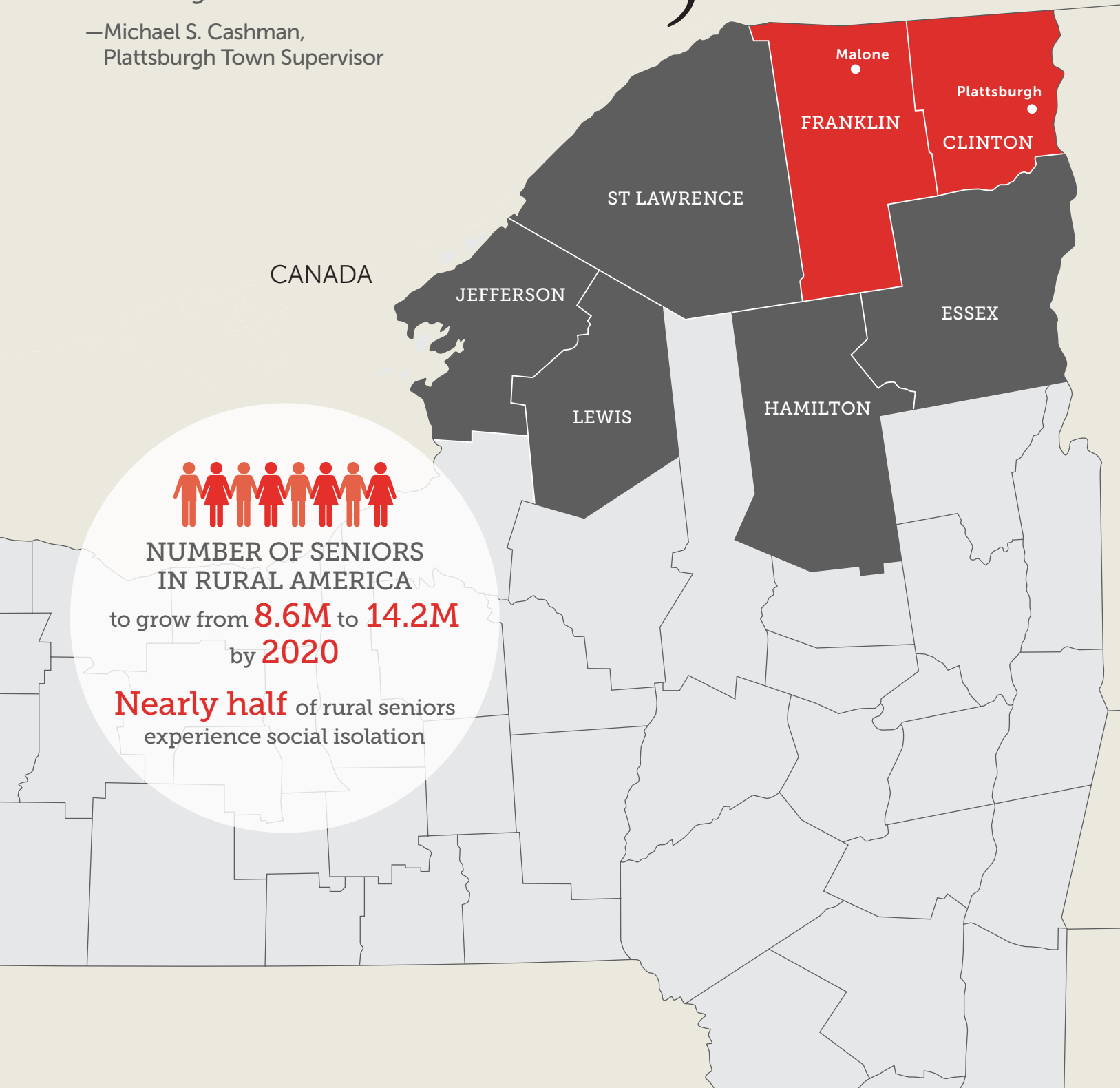


# Connecting Rural Older Americans with Technology: LESSONS FROM SENIOR PLANET

The age profile of rural America is rapidly changing—an exodus of young people has left many towns with high concentrations of senior citizens and few services to help them. Now a unique partnership in upstate New York has found promising solutions that combine technology with a human touch.

“**Senior Planet** arrived in the North Country more than two years ago. Since then, my constituents and folks around the region can’t stop talking about the **meaningful impact** on their lives. It’s **changed the way our community connects, finds resources, and stays vital**. Our population is aging, and without the **valuable services** Senior Planet provides, we’ll struggle to **remain relevant and healthy** in the face of a society that is **increasingly mediated by technology**. Being a rural community, this level of **connectivity is critical**. Plattsburgh cannot afford to lose Senior Planet.”

—Michael S. Cashman,  
Plattsburgh Town Supervisor







**“It’s frustrating to hear about all this technology but not be able to take advantage of it. People talk about the internet and email and cell phones like these are basic things, but my generation never learned to use them, and now we need help catching up.”**

– Mary, age 80

## A New Approach for Rural America

New York City-based nonprofit Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) creates award-winning programs that bring senior citizens together to learn technology and change their lives. In 2013, OATS was approached by leaders from Empire State Development (ESD) with a challenge:

**Could senior citizen technology training that worked successfully in America’s largest city be adapted to serve some of New York State’s most isolated older adults?**

With support from ESD and the New York State Assembly, OATS set out to meet that challenge. Over the course of three years, they launched two new state-of-the-art technology centers in the North Country region (just 30 minutes from the Canadian border), enrolled hundreds of seniors in training, partnered with local agencies, and developed a new, data-tested model for serving isolated older adults living in rural communities.

### ● Making Rural Seniors a Priority

Recent studies show nearly half of older Americans face social isolation, with experts estimating even higher rates among rural seniors. The dangers of social isolation in the aging population are legion, linked to a broad range of negative physical and psychological outcomes, from depression to premature death. This silent epidemic affects millions of rural seniors and is one of the most important challenges facing older Americans. Dr. Lenard Kaye, Director of the University of Maine Center



on Aging writes, “Let there be no doubt: Social isolation is a killer.”

Technology advances have the potential to play a transformative role in helping older adults combat isolation. In rural communities, though, a lack of technology infrastructure can keep older adults from getting online to connect to healthcare, jobs, friends and families.

Fortunately, rural broadband access has been identified on both state and federal levels as a key funding priority—and organizations like OATS are

providing training and support to help seniors meet enhanced access with competence and ease.

- New York State is investing \$500 million in new broadband infrastructure targeted at underserved, mostly rural communities.
- A host of new technology devices—tablets, smartphones, voice-activated speakers, etc.—are becoming increasingly popular among older adults.
- “Traditional” websites and social networking apps are increasingly complemented by telework and telehealth opportunities that create a lifeline for rural seniors.
- Existing networks of services so beneficial to rural communities (hospitals, senior services, universities, etc.) are providing channels for partnerships to leverage these new technologies.

“Senior Planet North Country” was created to connect with these resources and develop a coordinated strategy to harness the potential of rural seniors through high-quality technology programs.

***“It’s hard to describe how much I’ve gotten out of my Senior Planet experience. This program is of such value to the community.”***

– Dwight, age 73



## Meet Dwight

Dwight had never been on the internet before his first class at the North Country Senior Planet Exploration Center. He signed up because he thought it would be fun to “find out what the big deal was.” More than two years later, Dwight is one of Senior Planet’s biggest champions, having recently enrolled in his fifth class. Not only has Dwight become tech savvy (which has wildly impressed his nieces who live out of state), he’s also found a new community of friends. And he thinks the internet is “awesome.”





## Senior Planet North Country: Program Summary

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In December 2015, OATS opened the Senior Planet Exploration Center in Plattsburgh, New York, kicking off a multi-year effort to develop a series of locally relevant programs to engage older adults with technology. Located in a commercial mall (offering protection from the harsh North Country weather along with ample parking and a food court), the center quickly became a popular gathering site for local seniors. The facility includes a 15-seat classroom, a communal table for WiFi classes, free PC workstations, and a “living room” area for gaming and one-on-one instruction, all in a stylish and inviting setting designed by OATS.

OATS launched its Senior Planet North Country initiative after surveying hundreds of area residents regarding their priorities. Course content and programs were adapted to account for local needs, and the most popular classes included:

- iPad and Chromebook Basics
- Smart Home Technologies
- Smartphones
- Drone Adventure
- Digital Photography
- Social Media

Demand for classes and Senior Planet membership was extraordinary—the program signed up over 400 people during the first year of operation, and to date, nearly 900 people have participated in Plattsburgh and at its sister location in Malone, NY. This represents more than 13% of the population over 65 in these jurisdictions, an impressive testament to the strong demand present for technology programs by rural seniors.

Program enrollment was aided by the substantial attention from local press and elected officials. Senior Planet was the subject of 27 media placements with articles in the Plattsburgh Press Republican, The Malone Telegram, The Sun Community News, The Watertown Daily Times, New York





Nonprofit Media, with additional placements on local TV and radio including WMHT, WPTZ, ABC Local 22, Fox Local 44, North Country Public Radio, WCAX, WJOY, and WLYK. The Press-Republican declared the program a “big hit” that was “exceeding expectations,” and quoted member Marci Kavanagh as saying “You feel connected, and you know what is happening around the world...the world is at our fingertips now.”

Local public officials quickly became a regular presence at the Center, with visits from members of the State Assembly and State Senate, as well as Greg Olsen, Director of the New York State Office for the Aging, and leading administrators of the state’s economic development agency, Empire State Development. “It’s one of the most inspirational and effective programs I’ve ever seen,” said Mr. Olsen, who has committed to helping expand Senior Planet to other rural communities in New York State.

With the Plattsburgh Senior Planet Exploration Center thriving, OATS sought to develop other innovative ways to connect the North Country’s older adults to technology.

## ● The “Tech Spot”: A Rural Alternative to Computer Labs

Rural programs require more flexibility in program design and delivery, since many locations are performing multiple functions. The need for computer labs can place undue burden on local partners, who may not have dedicated facilities for a training room. To address these considerations, OATS designed a new kind of technology access environment—the Tech Spot—for the Malone Adult Center.

Traditional computer labs have rows of PCs in a classroom format, facing an instructor and a white board. This layout is space-intensive and prioritizes desktop workstations as a technology standard, while many rural seniors prefer to explore a variety of different devices and user profiles to see what has direct relevance to their needs. Working with local seniors and partner organizations, OATS designed the “Tech Spot,” a technology exploration and training environment that can be installed directly into the common space of a senior services site.



The Tech Spot enables participants to experiment with drones, laptops, tablets, telepresence robots, music streaming devices, biometric health input devices, and voice activated assistants, along with the more traditional PCs, laptops, and iPads. A central training screen facilitates instruction and enables collaborative distance learning, while an integrated charging station has power for 24 mobile tablets or laptops. The patent-pending design has become a mainstay attraction at the Malone Adult Center, with over 160 (non-duplicated) participants signing up for programs ranging from iPad Basics to video-link yoga classes.

## ● Senior Planet at Home: Serving People with Mobility Impairment

Another key innovation developed in response to requests by local partners for OATS to serve home-bound seniors who cannot travel to attend classes at program sites. Home visits reflected a new program approach at OATS, one that would expand the reach of Senior Planet to include substantial numbers of isolated older adults in rural areas who needed home-based programs and were enthusiastic about learning new technologies. Working with Meals on Wheels and other outreach channels, OATS identified a number of interested participants and developed a model for five-week courses to be delivered by OATS trainers who visited homes.

Since some seniors lacked devices and connectivity, OATS provided loaned iPads and WiFi hotspots with internet capability. The lending program enabled participants to learn on reliable devices and determine if they were interested in subscribing to home internet. Other participants had connectivity but needed upgrades in technology skills and troubleshooting of home technology issues.

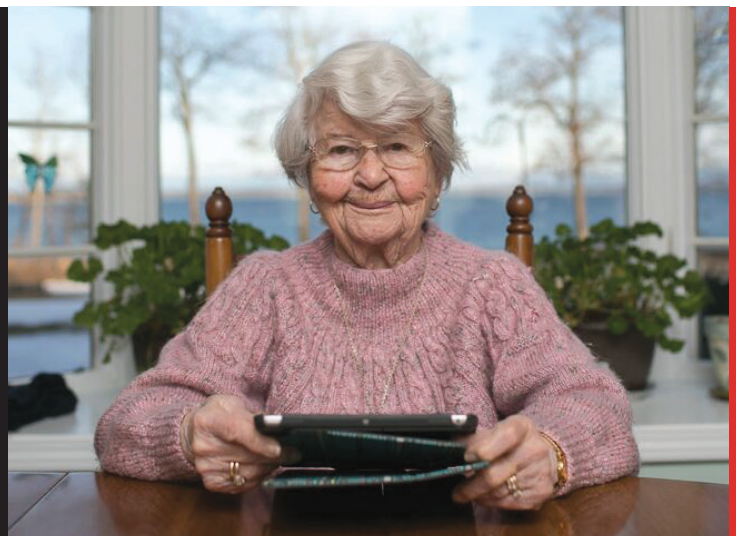
Key insights gained from the Senior Planet at Home program thus far include:

- Partnerships with outreach organizations were helpful in identifying participants. Meals on Wheels included information about the program in their weekly meal deliveries for the town of Malone, and local media advertising helped distribute the message about the program.
- The five-week timeframe was viewed as too brief by some participants, so OATS is exploring the option of extending the course to ten weeks.

“**Technology isn’t easy, but, with the help of Senior Planet, I’ve persisted. Now, when I go to my iPad, I can go anywhere in the world.**”  
– Sylvia, age 93

## Meet Sylvia

One of the first participants in the Senior Planet at Home program, Sylvia is a testament to what is possible when older adults are given opportunities to grow. She is a vibrant, positive person who knows that learning new things is key to aging well. Sylvia’s husband passed away recently, and the new technology skills she gained through Senior Planet have helped ease her loneliness. She now has a new iPad of her own and is continuing to learn every day.





- LTE-based hotspot connectivity worked quite well, and participants found the iPads to be enjoyable to learn and use. Future programs need to address ongoing access to connectivity and devices for low-income participants.
- Some participants followed structured curriculum closely, while others preferred to customize their learning experience; trainers had to remain flexible.
- As expected, home visits were time-consuming. OATS is exploring partnerships with local universities and other organizations to develop cost-effective methods of delivering training to a greater number of participants while expanding the engagement of the local community with the program.

## ● Results and Takeaways

With nearly 900 participants engaged and more than 500 class sessions delivered, Senior Planet North Country represents one of the country's largest-scale projects to provide technology programs for rural older

“*Let there be no doubt: Social isolation is a killer.*”

– Dr. Lenard Kaye  
University of Maine Center on Aging

adults. Over the three-year initiative, OATS has learned many invaluable lessons regarding the advantages and challenges of working in low-density rural communities. In general, we found that services were well received, and existing curriculum offerings (with minor modifications) proved relevant to the lives of rural participants. Local partners were eager to collaborate with OATS and worked hard to bring Senior Planet into their communities. Local elected officials and press took great interest in the initiative and provided valuable support and publicity.

OATS collected data on hundreds of variables during the program. Here is a sample:



“Everyone travels this road of aging, and we don’t want to be forgotten. I was fearful of new technology and feeling left out. Now I’m here learning something new pretty much every day. And every day, I feel more and more confident. Senior Planet has encouraged me to expand my horizons.”

– Elaine, age 69

## Report Card: North County

- Total enrollment was **852 people**, with a median age of 73. Participants were 64 percent female, 89 percent white, 40 percent with a disability, and 35 percent living alone.
- **77** percent reported feeling more confident living independently as a result of the program.
- **83** percent reported a higher quality of life.
- **40** percent purchased a technology device, and **33** percent reported signing up for home broadband or intending to do so in the near future.
- **98** percent said they would recommend the program to a friend or family member (Net Promoter Score).

The program costs approximately \$250,000 per year to sustain across both towns, including technology, curriculum, training, facilities, transportation, staffing, and administration. OATS estimates that some efficiencies could be realized if the program were to be implemented at larger scale, and with longer-term financial commitments from public funders.

## The Future of Rural Technology Programs for Older Adults

Older adults living in rural towns and counties are the lifeblood of community in America. Over eight million seniors currently reside in these geographies where they provide essential support for their families and communities, including nonprofits, faith-based institutions, libraries, schools, and local businesses. Aging policy in America is increasingly becoming a rural concern as the proportion of older residents who live in low-density areas is rising every year. By 2020, over 14 million seniors will live in rural communities, yet few new programs have been established to provide critical programs and services.





Senior Planet North Country offers a trove of new information and data to inform efforts that serve rural older adults with technology training and programs. The intense demand for these services is evidenced by the large and increasing numbers of people who enroll. Most members attend multiple classes and programs—with many even making the trip to Albany to share their enthusiasm about Senior Planet with elected officials—suggesting a deep reservoir of desire among older adults to engage in technology learning.

Other states—notably Texas, Alaska, and Minnesota—have piloted programs to offer training and connectivity to rural seniors, with generally positive outcomes.

A recent report on rural prosperity from the U.S. Department of Agriculture called attention to the powerful role and effect of technology in enhancing the quality of life in rural towns and counties, and called for “executive leadership to expand e-connectivity across rural America.” OATS supports the priorities identified by the USDA regarding the importance of investing in the connectivity and prosperity of rural areas, and further recommends the following efforts:

- The federal government should adopt the USDA recommendation of securing digital connectivity across rural America, and should further support complementary broadband adoption and training

initiatives to ensure that older adults are able to take full advantage of these new resources.

- States should launch technology training centers for older adults in rural districts and provide funding for quality outreach, training, and programs, with the aim of bringing digital participation rates for older adults in line with those of all Americans.
- Corporate and philanthropic foundations should provide initial financing of start-up efforts for nonprofit entrepreneurs, and should sponsor annual convenings to promote sharing of best practices and outcome data.
- Nonprofits should continue to collaborate to establish and grow programs that use technology to empower older adults in rural areas, including standalone centers, training partnerships, home-visiting programs, and research collaboratives.

OATS plans to build on the success of its three-year effort in the North Country Region of New York State to expand program services to all rural counties in New York State, as well as establish new partnerships in locations around the country. With the ongoing partnership of public officials, corporate and philanthropic supporters, and local civic and nonprofit organizations, OATS looks forward to serving many more rural seniors in the years to come.



**The Senior Planet North Country program currently must re-establish funding every year. Members have become the most passionate advocates for keeping the program going. The stories they share with others in the community and with their legislators speak of the tremendous impact Senior Planet has had on so many lives.**



*To Whom It May Concern:*

*I'm 67 years old and can't afford to retire. In October, I lost my job and have been searching for a new one since then. I had to apply for emergency food and heat benefits. Just recently, I finally was offered a job.*

*I have basic computer skills, but I need some further education. In fact, during my interview I told my new employer that I would be updating my skills at Senior Planet.*

*Senior Planet got this job for me. I will be forever grateful.*

*Then I heard they may close. A requirement of this job is access to a computer and printer. I depend on the computer and printer I use at Senior Planet to keep this job until I can afford to purchase my own.*

*Clinton County is a rural area with low incomes and few good jobs. With all the budget cuts, we need Senior Planet more than ever in this area. People here love this service.*

*Please, please, please continue to fund Senior Planet. It's truly a wonderful place.*

*Thank you.*

*Betty Lou LaJoy*





*“There are so many more people across the rural areas of New York State—and the country—who could benefit from what we offer...With more, we could do more.”*

—Thomas Kamber, Executive Director  
Older Adults Technology Services

