Sustaining Seniors Aging in Place Program (SSAIP) is an innovative program in Charleston, SC, that includes Telehealth/Telemedicine, a food pantry that has delivered more than 400,000 free meals, accessible transportation and a community garden among its offerings. It is all part of the pioneering approach to senior affordable housing instituted by that southern city’s Humanities Foundation.

In addition to Telehealth, Humanities Foundation has developed more than 2,000 residential units and helped more than 26,000 individuals avoid eviction or loss of essential utility services, as well as serving hundreds of thousands of free meals. Humanities Foundation currently operates in four eastern states and is looking to expand its reach.

Telehealth is an emerging field of medical care, for which Humanities Foundation has partnered with the Medical University of South Carolina, the largest medical facility in the state. Instead of resident patients having to arrange for doctors’ appointments and transportation, the foundation has brought healthcare directly to them. By using wearable and portable devices to track heart rate, send reminders, transmit results and monitor residents from their own homes, a major hurdle in senior living is being overcome. Plans are now underway to replicate SSAIP in the foundation’s Virginia communities.

At Humanities Foundation’s Ashleigh Place senior housing apartments in Richmond Hill, GA, 18 residents are currently being remotely monitored in their residences, while others are monitored in a special Telehealth room. The Medical University collects and stores the records and they can be sent wherever they’re needed: to doctors, relatives or insurance payers.

Business and philanthropy

“We wanted to give back, we wanted to put something back into the community, and we wanted to create something that would be a philanthropic organization that could be part of our business.”

This is how Humanities’ President and Board Chair Tracy Doran describes the organization she and her husband Bob created in 1992. Its stated mission is, “To develop the highest quality affordable and workforce housing possible, while enhancing the lives of our residents and improving the communities in which we develop through affordability, education and advocacy.”

And as Doran notes, “Each building project starts with Low Income Housing Tax Credits,” with a focus on nine percent LIHTCs.

Doran’s empathy for those in need comes naturally. She received a degree in nursing from the Medical University of South Carolina and worked in critical care and emergency medicine for 14 years. For three years, she was executive director of Hospice for Charleston. By that time, she and Robert “Bob” Doran had had their second child and Tracy was helping out with development, financing and marketing for the James Doran Company, the real estate firm that had been founded as a shipping company in 1882 by Bob’s great grandfather, and which...
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had transitioned into retail and multifamily development projects, among other properties.

“IT was time to choose,” she reflects. She obtained her real estate broker and Series 7 General Securities Representative licenses.

“Around 1990, Bob and I became involved with the Mayor of Charleston’s Counsel on Homelessness. Working with the people who brought us in touch with this, we realized there really needed to be a nonprofit with development experience. So that really brought my career around full circle. We wanted to create something that would be a philanthropic organization that could be part of our business and involve our family.” Bob continued to concentrate mainly on the family businesses while Tracy focused on the charitable side. In a 2012 interview with Affordable Housing Finance, she called Bob “one of the smartest and most optimistic people I know.”

Since launching Humanities Foundation, she has been vice president of the South Carolina Affordable Housing Coalition and currently sits on the Service Delivery Committee of the South Carolina Long-Term Care Task Force.

“What has made Humanities Foundation special,” Doran observes, “is that we carry our business practices over to the nonprofit sector. This has given us an edge in some of our projects.”

There are several elements to the decision-making process on which projects the foundation pursues. “We compete just like everyone else for tax credit allocations, so a lot is driven by state QAPs [Qualified Allocation Plans]: Where can we find sites that are good opportunities that can also rank high enough? Having said that, we judge each location on its own merits and what kind of impact it can have on the community. And when we put our packages together, we know approximately what it will take and what our funding stack needs to be.”

As Humanities Foundation expands its geographical reach, it is concentrating less on its home base of South Carolina. One reason for this has been the state’s changing LIHTC QAP preferences, which now concentrate on more rural deals, while the foundation continues its urban orientation. Much of its new focus has been on Virginia, which Doran says, “has been an excellent state for us – a real fit. It now represents about half of our portfolio. Last year, we were awarded more tax credits than anyone else.”

Those awards translate into 302 new housing units, including 120 family and 100 senior residences in Spotsylvania County – one of the state’s fastest growing regions – and 82 family units in Richmond.

Focus on homelessness

Humanities Foundation’s mission is not limited to providing high-quality, low-cost and affordable housing. It has also pioneered in other critical services for its tenant and client base. After several years of providing affordable housing in the Charleston area, the foundation leaders felt the need to do more to stem the tide of homelessness among low-income individuals and families.

“We were doing a development on James Island, SC, which was a real NIMBY nightmare. There was a house fire in the community and five out of seven people inside died,” Doran recalls. “We knew we needed to do something to help this family, so we started raising money. And once you get involved in something like this, you realize the larger need.” ShelterNet was organized in 1995 to help prevent homelessness by providing emergency financial assistance.

The fund pays one-time costs, such as rental/utility deposits and overdue rent or mortgage payments if the recipient can demonstrate an ability to otherwise make ends meet. ShelterNet receives referrals from social service and mental health agencies, programs for the aging, and hospitals, schools, faith-based institutions and other nonprofit organizations that work with low-income
families and individuals in need.

“NIMBYism will always be with us, but our main tool in combating it is the quality of affordable housing we’re creating. In most cases, you look at our projects and don’t say, ‘Oh, that’s affordable housing.’ We’re constantly trying to educate people and exposing them to who their neighbors are: single moms and people with two jobs — hardworking people like you. We say, ‘Please come visit and see for yourself.’”

Each Humanities Foundation initiative is directed at a specific observed problem. Telehealth is no exception.

“A couple of years ago, we became concerned with how many people were having to move out of senior independent living of Charleston,” Doran explains. “So we asked ourselves what we could do to let them age in place longer. We worked with then-Lieutenant Governor Glenn McConnell [currently president of the College of Charleston] who headed up the state’s Office on Aging. We received a $7,500 grant to conduct a survey on health challenges, along with the Nursing Research Department of the Medical University. The document confirmed that about half of senior residents had some sort of chronic condition and one-third were contending with serious illnesses and limited mobility. Then the school said, ‘We’d really like to be part of the solution.’”

Now, nursing students go into the targeted residential facilities every month to check on patients, rather than having them go to various offices and wait long periods between visits. “It’s an optional resident service,” Doran notes, “but it helps us get a jump on health problems before they become overwhelming.

“This is an ongoing research effort,” Doran continues. “Through Telehealth facilities, through healthy eating education, mental health surveys and other measures, we’re basically asking, ‘What is going on with you and what will make you able to stay healthier and live independently longer?’” As one example, a Doris Duke Foundation endowment through the Medical University provided Fitbits for 400 residents to encourage and evaluate greater levels of physical activity.

The associated medical and nursing programs are eager to participate because of the training benefits for their students and having a senior population of “research subjects” in one place and as a model for students to learn about Telehealth. Humanities Foundation has also developed partnerships with South University’s College of Nursing in Savannah, GA and Lord Fairfax Community College in Middletown, VA.

“We are saving the government a lot of money if we can keep seniors aging in place longer into their 70s or 80s, and in terms of ER visits and hospitalizations,” says Doran. “And we’re collecting the real metrics to prove it.”

One of the greatest Telehealth challenges, she concedes, is acclimatizing seniors in medical need effectively to use smart phones and other digital devices. “There has to be a secure system, so we need to get seniors educated on how to use them and find simpler ways to make that happen and get them more comfortable with the devices and the process.”

With all of her business and philanthropic activities, she says she is most concerned about legislative challenges to the LIHTC program and potential cutbacks in HUD programs that support those housing efforts. “We are seeing people now who never expected to need affordable housing. And we’re also dealing with people who look to our housing as a stepping-stone to get back to their former financial independence. So we are always looking for new development opportunities.”