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Two-year pilot project aimed at helping seniors live in their own homes

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Health Minister Gene Zwozdesky shakes hands with Ben Krzysik while Child and Youth Services Minister (left to right) Yvonne Fritz, Service Alberta Minister Heather Klimchuk and Municipal Affairs Minister Hector Goudreau look on after Zwozdesky made the announcement of a two-year continuing care technology pilot in Grande Prairie and Medicine Hat. Krzysik is part of the project.

A two-year pilot project announced Thursday will allow Grande Prairie and Medicine Hat seniors to stay home a little longer instead of in continuing care facilities,

Through the \$1.9-million pilot project, about 25 seniors in the two cities are testing "wander management" systems, personal emergency response programs and medication management systems.

Health Minister Gene Zwozdesky said the project is one of the initiatives for continuing care under the province's five-year health action plan.

"We all have an aging relative, an aging mom or dad or grandparent or whomever it may be," said Zwozdesky. "We know these people want to stay in their homes for as long as possible. Part of our job is to help them feel even more secure, more independent, to be able to age in dignity, as we call it."

Zwozdesky said technology is playing a greater and larger role.

"It certainly has its place in health care," he said. "In fact there are two primary purposes for this project . one of them is to provide greater safety and the second to provide reassurance and peace of mind to caregivers and loved ones."

The three technology pieces include Care Link Advantage, MedSignals, and Priority Care Call.

Multiple Sclerosis sufferer Ben Krzysik, 69, is part of the Grande Prairie pilot. He has used Care Link Advantage for about two months. There are sensors and cameras installed in his home and he carries a pendant.

"It allows people stay in their homes a lot longer," said Krzysik. "And that's what most people want. They don't want to go into institutions. They want to be at home."

Krzysik said the technology allows him and his wife to be reassured if something were to happen if he was home alone.

"When a person has an illness or whatever, they can live with that because it is theirs," he said. "However it is unfair to the caregiver that they have to live with that. It's good that they can get a break and get away from the person who has the disability or in the case of an aging parent or family member."

There are roughly 14 registered clients taking part in the pilot so far in the city. All but three have their technology installed. The AHS homecare case managers referred participants to the pilot. Referrals are still being accepted to the project.

Tracy Ruptash, AHS project co-ordinator, said the technologies are not intended to replace homecare services but intended to augment the care and provide informal caregivers with added comfort and be safe in their homes and get the help they need when they need it.

"I've worked with homecare for years," said Ruptash. "Of course our challenge is always in keeping our clients - seniors and otherwise - at home as long as possible supporting them and maximizing their independence.

"This is another arsenal in the tool belt of health care that can be provided to help ensure safety and relieve some of the caregiver stress out there and clients remain in their homes as long as possible."

Zwozdesky said this project is critical for Alberta because starting this year about 3,000 people will be turning 65 on a monthly basis and within a few years, it will be 5,000 people.

"Right now our focus is on the pilot and the evaluation of it," he said. "Then we will develop strategies."

In two to three years, the province could implement the program throughout Alberta.