

# Connecting Vulnerable Seniors to Social Services With Voice-Assisted Search

By **N. Sein**,  
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AARP Foundation and Aunt Bertha have launched voice-assisted search for local social services to be used by seniors in affordable housing communities in Northwest Baltimore.

In 2018, AARP Foundation piloted an innovative program with Comprehensive Housing Assistance, Inc. (CHAI), a Baltimore-based organization that helps older residents remain independent in their homes. Together, they distributed Amazon Echo devices to seniors in affordable housing communities in Baltimore, with the aim of

fighting social isolation with voice-activated technology (in this case, the built-in Alexa voice assistant). Over the course of one year, they gathered user feedback to develop customized “skills” for residents, such as community reminders and alerts — when the mail has arrived, what’s on the dinner menu, and so on. Residents are also able to place voice-assisted queries with the devices. The successful pilot culminated in the 2019 launch of AARP Foundation Connect2Affect Connected Communities™, through which nearly 300 residents across CHAI’S Weinberg Village senior living communities in Northwest Baltimore will be using Alexa-capable devices.

The new Alexa skill — powered by Aunt Bertha, a social services software platform — enables vulnerable seniors to easily gather information about free and reduced-cost assistance in their community, such as food pantries, transportation, tax preparation and more. Voice-assisted search not only reduces physical and technological barriers to navigating social services for seniors but emotional ones as well, allowing them to reach out for help in the comfort of their homes, without fear or stigma.

Interactive devices in the homes of seniors create a form of engagement that helps reduce the sense of social isolation through dialogue with a machine. However, the presence of these devices, in and of themselves, cannot combat social isolation entirely. The true innovation that AARP Foundation is driving toward is using these devices as a means, not an end, to connect seniors to their real-life communities. Armed with the information to take the first step, vulnerable seniors will be better positioned to receive fellowship and help from people in their community who want to serve them.

## **Get the Aunt Bertha Skill on Amazon**

### **About Aunt Bertha**

Our mission is to connect all people in need and the programs that serve them (with dignity and ease). We’re

the largest network of free and reduced-cost social assistance in every ZIP Code across the US, including federal, state, county, municipal, and local programs in the biggest cities and smallest towns. When we started out in 2010, we defined a new way for people to access social services that empowered them to own their search. Users simply enter their ZIP Code into our platform, unlocking a wide breadth of free and reduced-cost assistance in their community, such as food, housing, financial and legal help, health services, and more. We provide free eligibility, intake, and reporting tools for deep engagement to Community Organizations. When you receive people in need from our platform, you'll spend less time qualifying and more time helping.

#### About AARP Foundation

AARP Foundation works to end senior poverty by helping vulnerable older adults build economic opportunity and social connectedness. As AARP's charitable affiliate, we serve AARP members and nonmembers alike. Bolstered by vigorous legal advocacy, we spark bold, innovative solutions that foster resilience, strengthen communities and restore hope.

AARP Foundation. For a future without senior poverty.

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