

# Technology and Aging: Minnesota Member Leads Charge to Break Down Barriers

advocacy

**T**here's no question. Technology can transform aging. But in this age of GPS systems, camera phones and even refrigerators with online access, it's a wonder that the local Best Buy or Radio Shack isn't flooded with inexpensive electronics for the elderly.

The reason? The numerous regulatory and payment barriers that slow technology's ability to foster independence and reduce health care costs for seniors and their caregivers. That's why AAHSA's Center for Aging Services Technologies (CAST) is encouraging Congress to pass S. 908, a bill to establish the Consortium on the Impact of Technology in Aging Services. If passed, the bill would create a consortium of experts whose sole focus would be to examine these barriers and propose solutions to surpass them.

At the heart of CAST's advocacy efforts is Kathy Bakkenist, chief operating officer and senior vice president of strategy and operations for Ecumen in Shorewood, Minn. Bakkenist was the driving force behind organizing a briefing on Capitol Hill to educate congressional staff about the bill and demonstrate how technologies developed today could make America a better place to grow old tomorrow.

CAST, the Senate Special Committee on Aging and the Medical Technology Caucus hosted the Jan. 30 event. Staff from more than 30 congressional offices came to hear about the barriers to bringing technology for seniors to the marketplace from Bakkenist; AAHSA President and CEO Larry Minnix; Darrin Jones of Intel's Digital Health Group; Mike Magee, a physician, host of the "Health Commentary with Dr. Mike Magee" Web site, and CAST's senior fellow in health policy; and Honor Hacker, an Ecumen resident who uses technology in her daily life.

After the briefing, 13 exhibitors displayed technologies ranging from automatic medication dispensers to remote monitoring systems. Hill staffers tried out a "smart cane" to prevent falling from Oregon's Health and Science University, tested a bed equipped with sensors to monitor health status from the University of Virginia, and enjoyed a few rounds of "brain games" from Dakim. Many enjoyed playing the games, designed to slow memory loss, with Hacker.

"Honor has always been an inspiration," Bakkenist said. "She volunteered for our first technology pilot and has become a champion."

A similar event that CAST sponsored at the 2005 White House Conference on Aging was what ignited Bakkenist's interest in advancing aging-services technologies. "I saw that we have a



Honor Hacker, an Ecumen resident who uses technology in her daily life, shows a congressional staffer how a computer "brain game" can sharpen memory skills.

solution here," she said. "When we visited our congressman afterwards, he told us that we were the first providers to offer a solution instead of just asking for more money."

Bakkenist would also say that the benefits of advocating for advances in aging-services technologies aren't just for the future. They are for the here and now. "We benefit by having technology companies look at us," she said. "Our involvement with technology advocacy helps us differentiate ourselves in the marketplace."

Bakkenist's interest goes beyond gadgets and gizmos, says Minnix. "Members like Kathy and Ecumen are models for how we should embrace the future and create it. They recognize that leadership and investment in advocacy can pay returns now and in the future. And it's time for more of us to do the same."

"We need more pioneering providers, like Kathy, to participate in this advocacy effort," agrees Majd Alwan, CAST's director. Key to success of the effort, he believes, is objective, outcome-oriented evaluation of these technologies, in partnership with providers, to provide evidence of their value to decision and policy makers.

So, grab your laptop, put your cell phone on silent, and join Kathy Bakkenist in putting a passion for technology into practice for the people you serve. To find out more, visit the policy page of the CAST Web site, [www.agingtech.org](http://www.agingtech.org).

*Written by Lauren Shaham, vice president of media relations and member communications for AAHSA.*