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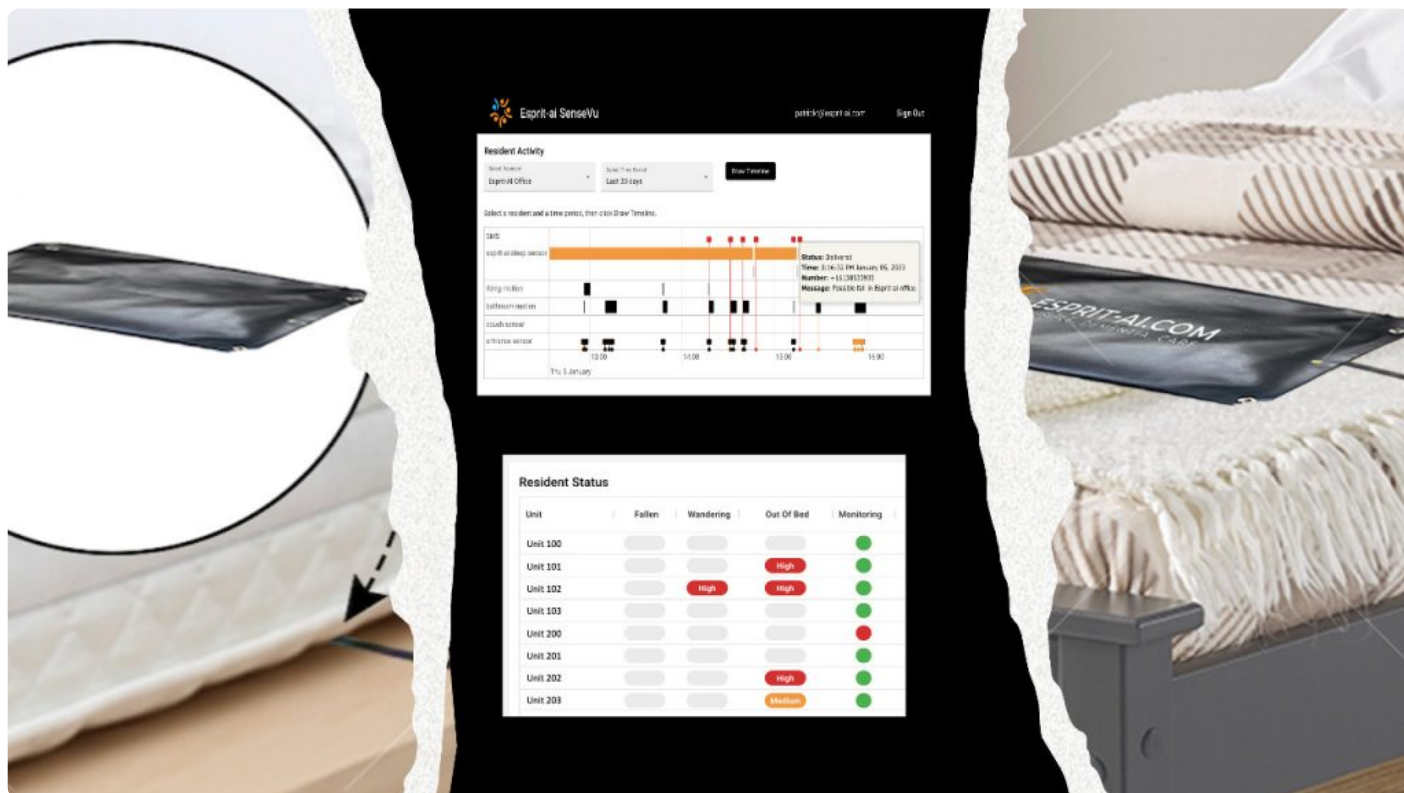
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Sensing opportunity: Esprit-ai sees surging demand for motion-tracking tech



David Sali (<https://obj.ca/author/davidgreateriver-ca/>)

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Ottawa-based Esprit-ai sells its sensors to 50 senior-care and retirement homes in Eastern Ontario. Photo courtesy Esprit-ai

Organizations: [Esprit-ai](https://obj.ca/company/esprit-ai/) (<https://obj.ca/company/esprit-ai/>), [Newbridge Networks](https://obj.ca/company/newbridge-networks/) (<https://obj.ca/company/newbridge-networks/>), [Wesley Clover International](https://obj.ca/company/wesley-clover-international/) (<https://obj.ca/company/wesley-clover-international/>), [Zodiac Light Waves](https://obj.ca/company/zodiac-light-waves/) (<https://obj.ca/company/zodiac-light-waves/>).

People: [Chad Holliday](https://obj.ca/people/chad-holliday/) (<https://obj.ca/people/chad-holliday/>), [Darren Helmer](https://obj.ca/people/darren-helmer/) (<https://obj.ca/people/darren-helmer/>), [Patrick Tan](https://obj.ca/people/patrick-tan/) (<https://obj.ca/people/patrick-tan/>).

After making their mark in Ottawa’s tech scene, Darren Helmer, Chad Holliday and Patrick Tan decided a few years ago it was time to tackle “very real, topical and personal problems” facing society.

The former colleagues who met while working at Newbridge Networks in the 1990s turned their attention to an issue that has become a hot-button topic in Canadian health care: caring for this country’s rapidly aging population.

They created electronic sensors that use artificial intelligence to keep tabs on residents of long-term care facilities and retirement homes. The devices, which resemble large mouse pads, are installed under mattresses and detect when people get out of bed, wander around a room or open the door.

The company they launched in 2018, Esprit-ai, has implemented its technology at 50 locations in Eastern Ontario and is poised to expand into Toronto and other Canadian markets.

“We all have parents that are aging,” says Holliday, whose 80-year-old father Ken suffers from post-polio syndrome and has mobility issues.

“We wanted to do something meaningful with what we learned in the tech space, and this is a real problem that our society is facing.”

Greying population

The eight-person venture sold its first sensors in 2020 and has doubled its revenues every year. Holliday, the firm’s chief marketing officer, says he expects demand for the products to keep ramping up as Canada’s greying population requires more around-the-clock care.

According to data from the 2021 census, people aged 85 and over are among the country’s fastest-growing demographics. Statistics Canada predicts that, over the next 25 years, the number of Canadians in that age category could triple to nearly 2.5 million.

As the population ages and rates of dementia and conditions such as Alzheimer's disease continue to rise, Holliday says smart devices like Esprit-ai's sensors can take some of the burden off a health-care system that's under growing strain.



Esprit-ai co-founder Chad Holliday (left) with mom Cecile and dad Ken, who suffers from post-polio syndrome. Photo courtesy Chad Holliday

The system constantly feeds data about patients' sleep and movement patterns to health-care workers, alerting them instantly when people leave their rooms or have potentially fallen.

The technology can also be programmed to illuminate mobility devices such as walkers as soon as any movement is detected so that dementia patients, for example, see them and are reminded to use them.

Holliday says the more data staff at care homes have about their patients, the more targeted they can be in their responses – for example, knowing who is not sleeping well and might be at a higher risk of falling the next day.

In turn, that makes workers more efficient and productive, he explains.

“We have customers that say, with every 15 rooms that it's installed in, it's like having an extra (personal support worker) or nurse, which is super important right now, especially with the shortage of those kinds of skilled workers,” Holliday says.

Sales partnership

Esprit-ai recently signed a partnership agreement that will see Ottawa-based Zodiac Light Waves, which provides IT services to senior-care and retirement homes, sell and distribute its sensors to customers in Toronto and other parts of Canada.

Holliday says the partnership will give a major boost to Esprit-ai. Up to now, the company – which is mostly self-financed, along with some backing from Terry Matthews-led venture capital firm Wesley Clover International – has relied almost entirely on word of mouth to market its products.

“We just don’t have the feet on the ground to support an expansion, so we’re really happy that’s happening,” he says. “That will be a huge growth opportunity for us.”

Holliday says the firm eventually hopes to break into the U.S. market and start selling the sensors, which require a subscription to the AI software that tracks and analyzes data, to residents of private homes as well.

“There’s a big group of people that are 85 and up that are about to need more medical care,” he says. “This isn’t a big money-making venture for us. What we want to do is help people. That sounds sort of trite, but at the end of the day, that’s what we feel we’re doing.”