

Smartphone App for Homeless Youths

Grant Type: **Dollar and nondollar support**

Dollar Amount: **\$5,000 (initial), then \$75,000 (subsequent)**

Foundation Name: **VNA Foundation**

What was your objective with the grant or initiative?

Two-thirds of street-based youths own smartphones. Many will give up food and shelter before giving up their phone, which is their primary link to others. The goal of this grant was to develop a smartphone app that provides real-time information about nearby services that are key to homeless youths' survival, thereby decreasing their isolation and sense of hopelessness while helping them transition into housing. The foundation also believed the app would benefit providers by streamlining data and referrals to make it easier to convey information to their target audience and fellow providers.

What were the results of this grant or initiative?

The foundation's initial \$5,000 planning grant funded focus groups with service providers and street-based youths. It was conveyed by these groups that existing resources often were outdated, incomplete, and not youth-friendly, and a definite need existed for a go-to resource, such as the app, that could describe available services in an accessible and timely way. Participants emphasized that the app should include two key functions important to their health: (1) real-time data about availability of beds at shelters and (2) the proximity, cost, and types of services provided by local community clinics.



Why would you say this grant or initiative had outsized impact?

At last report, 2,647 Chicago, IL, youths live on their own; until now, though, they had no reliable way to access information on services. Via the app's use of the GPS feature common to all smartphones, homeless youths soon will be able to determine where they can find the closest bed or other resource. Via a no-cost app and a one-time download over a free Wi-Fi network, services and the youths who need them will be linked by a tap of the finger.

The VNA Foundation learned two important lessons:

1. Never be afraid to take on a cause or purpose that initially may seem to be out of your comfort zone. The odds are that other grantmaking experiences will supply the insight needed to make progress.
2. Smaller funders can accomplish much by supporting new twists on established methods (in this case, applying existing smartphone technology to the challenging needs of an underserved population).

This smartphone app will markedly improve the lives of a most vulnerable population—youths without homes—and also may contribute to their seeking the help necessary to transition out of homelessness. By making use of common technology to address a challenging problem and developing a workable model that can be replicated easily in other cities, the foundation feels that its \$5,000 initial investment has definitely created an outsized impact.

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