A Life-Changing App Grows in Pittsburgh

Nonprofits, Government, Corporations, and Homeless Youth Team Up for a Solution

by Mari Rich

"My life would undoubtedly have been much easier had BigBurgh.com existed when I was homeless," Grace Enick asserts. Enick—who spent much of her teens and early 20s battling depression, untreated trauma, and addiction—was referring to a new mobile-optimized website aimed at connecting Pittsburgh residents in need with important services. "When you're out on the street,

as I was sometimes, you're constantly at risk of being exploited, sexually and otherwise," Enick says. "You might not know where your next meal is coming from or where you're going to sleep that night. If I was able to access immediate and effective support when I needed it most, my story might have turned out differently."

A Casual Chat Sparks a Solution

The idea for BigBurgh.com originated with Joe Lagana, the founder of the Homeless Children's Education Fund (HCEF), a nonprofit group he established in 1999 to serve homeless students in Pennsylvania's Allegheny County. The organization—which he launched after looking for volunteer opportunities in the early days of his retirement from posts such as a teacher, guidance counselor, and, ultimately, head of a consortium of more than 40 school districts—runs afterschool and summer programs, builds and equips learning centers within partner shelters, distributes much-needed school supplies to homeless students, and more.

Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto shows off the app at an August 2016 press conference. Peduto, who made ending homelessness a priority of his administration. He pledged government support to maintain the site once the trial period ends.

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One day, casually chatting with Maurita Bryant, a now-retired assistant chief with the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, Lagana commiserated with her about the difficulties of helping homeless individuals whom members of the force encountered while on patrol. Pittsburgh officers kept folded up in their uniform hats typed lists of shelters and soup kitchens, and when they met someone experiencing homelessness, the best they could do was to pull out the sometimes tattered and rarely updated sheets of paper and start making phone calls, in an attempt to match the person with a needed service. Now, well into the 21st century, they both agreed, there simply had to be a better way. Why, they asked, invoking Apple's famed slogan, wasn't there an app for that? Because of the open dialogue between a city official and a nonprofit advocate, a potentially life-saving tool was born.

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Pittsburgh, the center of Alleghany County, is widely considered a city on the rise; once known as a solidly blue-collar hub of steel-making and manufacturing, it was recently named a top destination by both the well-respected magazine Travel & Leisure and the travel service TripAdvisor, and in 2015 it was recognized by Zagat for the quality and variety of its restaurants. Despite those markers of upward mobility, homelessness is a serious problem in the area. During the 2014–15 school year, Allegheny County schools identified 3,000 students experiencing homelessness—a figure that Lagana and HCEF suspect is low, given the number of children who might not have been included in that survey for various reasons. "These kids don't walk around wearing hats or T-shirts proclaiming that they're homeless," Lagana explains. "And when they're asked, they might not admit that they're homeless, either because they're embarrassed or because they simply don't think of themselves with that label; some prefer to think of themselves as simply going through a rough patch or having some trouble."

When the conversation with Bryant sparked the idea for an app, Lagana immediately knew whom to call: Bob Firth of the local firm Informing Design, Inc., which is widely recognized throughout the region for translating complex sets of data into simple and easy-to-read maps. (Among the company's triumphs is the large and colorful sign system that has guided Pittsburgh motorists to major destinations and parking throughout the city for the last two decades.) Firth, a forward-thinking man who relishes a challenge, agreed to donate his services, and Lagana raised $150,000—enough, he estimated, to launch a two-year pilot program—from such local groups as the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation, the Buncher Foundation, the Birmingham Foundation, and the Terry Serafini Family Foundation. The money raised was earmarked to maintain the site and continually update it once it was launched.

"I value the inclusive process that was undertaken because it was done with great respect and compassion for individuals living through tough times," says Pamela Golden, the executive director of the Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation, a group that saw BigBurgh's promise early on and provided funding.

Officer Ron Spangler speaks about BigBurgh.com at a press conference, explaining how the site helps police connect those experiencing homelessness to much-needed resources.

Firth began by studying the issues facing homeless youth, learning what resources were available in Pittsburgh to address those issues, and figuring out what type of online interface would be the most user-friendly yet comprehensive and efficient.

"We decided to design a mobile-optimized website that could be accessed easily from a cell phone, rather than something that had to be downloaded from an app store," he recalled. Firth explained that outlets like iTunes or Google Play sometimes make users think—mistakenly—that they must enter a credit card number in order to create an account and download even a free item. They wanted as few real or perceived barriers to accessing information as possible.

"We also had to make sure the search function worked better for this population than the usual Internet search engine," he said. "If you are a homeless person looking for free dental care, and you type that phrase into Google, for example, you'll get thousands of hits. The vast majority of them, however, will be advertisements for doctors offering free initial consultations, after which you'd be expected to pay full price for treatments. It's a lot to wade through if you're out on the street and in pain from a toothache. Additionally, if you have a limited data plan, you don't really have the time to scroll through useless listings."

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Lagana and Firth were met with some skepticism from government officials unfamiliar with Pittsburgh's homeless population. According to the skeptics' way of thinking, the plan might work if police and outreach workers could be convinced to use the service while out on the streets, but anyone unable to afford basic shelter could surely ill afford to maintain a cell phone and would not be able to take advantage of it themselves.

Left to right: Commander Anna Kudrav, Joe Lagana, and Officer Spangler confer at a press conference on BigBurgh.com. Commander Kudrav led the team of officers who first deployed the service out on the streets.

As the project's developers knew, however, those naysayers could not have been more wrong. Surveys and studies have shown that nationwide more than 60 percent of homeless youth have mobile phones and consider them to be essential lifelines—every bit as important as food or clothing. An even greater number—85 percent—went online regularly, if not through their phones then using the computers at libraries, drop-in centers, or other public facilities.

"My biggest challenge was to first get everyone I needed at the table, at the same time," Lagana recalls. "I wanted the support of Allegheny County officials, Pittsburgh's mayor, the Bureau of Police, the District Attorney's office, and the Sheriff's Department. Then, once they were sitting at the same table, I had to convince them that there really was a solution to what seemed to be an 'invisible' problem—because remember, a lot of the homeless and their problems are never seen by anyone not working directly in the field." He continues, "It was smooth sailing once I brought in a few homeless youth to speak to them and explain how much they relied on their mobile phones and how useful something like this could be. I was delighted and impressed that everyone got right on board."

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Build It Right and They Will Click

Firth knew that in order to attract users—particularly homeless youth—BigBurgh.com would need to be as eye-catching and easy-to-use as one of those popular games like Angry Birds or Candy Crush. Thus, open the site and you're greeted with the no-nonsense line, "Things are tough? Find good, free stuff here," along with a colorful dial that allows users to personalize the experience by clicking on their age group and gender (including transgender) and whether they are a military veteran or part of a family group with children under 18 seeking services. (If a user wants instead to see every-thing on offer, they can simply skip the first step.)

The next screen displays possible needs—a cooked meal or groceries, a bed for the night or a daytime drop-in center, clothing, a ride, medical care, and more—each represented by an easy-to-understand icon. Also included is a button for "Expert Help," which provides listings of parent-support groups, legal aid, behavioral health counseling, job-search resources, and more. In just a few clicks, users can find exactly what they need; a woman over 50 would not waste time traveling to a shelter for transgender youth, for example, or a 30-year-old army vet seeking a medical clinic would not be directed to a facility for elderly substance abusers.

The listings are given in order of proximity to the user's geo-location, with maps and full information about a facility's hours and policies. "Sometimes just listing an address is insufficient," Firth explains. "If the entrance to a building is around the back or if someone trying to gain entrance must ring a specific bell, we'll note all of that."

Even fewer clicks are required to access "safe places and hotlines" and "live street help"; those services are available through two buttons at the bottom of the screen. (Although Firth dislikes the term "panic button," it is loosely applicable in this case.) The first button quickly directs users to resources for victims of domestic violence, members of the LGBT community who may be suffering harassment, and others in need of immediate help. The latter button allows a user to initiate a live chat with an outreach worker from one of the county's social-services agencies, choosing from such options as "in physical distress," "need food," or 'just need someone to talk to." The outreach worker then has the option to

render advice remotely if appropriate or to drive to the user's location to help in person.

The platform itself serves as a sort of living map of resources in the area. If, for example, the data shows that it is more difficult to find dermatologists willing to work with the homeless than other medical specialists, site administrators from Firth's office can note that discrepancy and try to remedy the situation.

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"There's a hierarchy of needs, so we knew it was important to first address basic things like shelter, food, and medical care," Lagana explained. "Once those fundamental and life-saving needs are met, we can work on educating BigBurgh's users; I don't mean educating in just the academic sense, because it goes far beyond just advising them where they can enroll their child in Pre-K or complete their GED. We educate them on a broader level about everything they need to get their lives back on track."

Improving Relationships on the Streets and Around the Community

The first users of BigBurgh.com were eight Pittsburgh police officers working under the leadership of Com-mander Anna Kudrav who underwent training and deployed the service out on the streets. In addition, a small group of homeless youth were given prepaid cell phones with which to access the site. It was an immedi-ate success. During a period of beta testing, which com-menced in April 2016, BigBurgh.com was used some 1,500 times (a figure that excludes the times it was accessed during training sessions), and when it went live in August, it began receiving an average of 3,000 hits a month.

The police were especially enthusiastic about the benefits. Encountering someone with foot problems, for example, they could find a source of free podiatric care, discover if a shuttle service or other transportation option was available, and make sure the person could find a good meal after being treated—all with just a few clicks.

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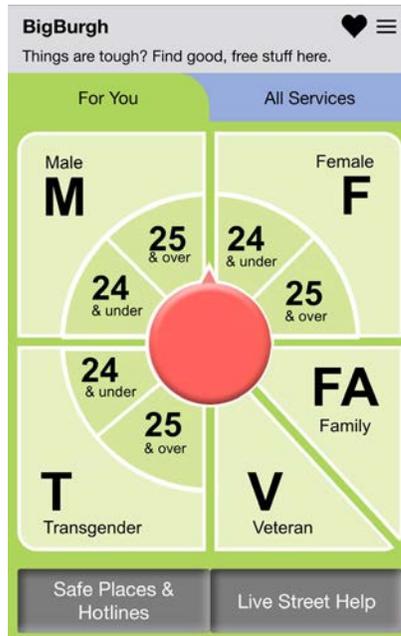
BigBurgh.com was designed to be eye-catching and easy-to-use. It includes a colorful dial that lets the user personalize the results by choosing their age range, gender, and whether they are a veteran of the military or part of a family with children.

"BigBurgh.com is transforming our relationship with the community," Commander Kudrav asserts. "Sometimes the police are featured in the media in a negative light, and homeless people might tend to feel uneasy when we approach them. Now, however, it's becoming accepted that we are out on the street to help and that we have the resources to get people exactly what they need exceptionally quickly. That makes our relationship with the homeless much stronger than it's been in the past and eases the tensions that can arise when a uniformed officer interacts with a member of a vulnerable population."

Chris Roach, an outreach worker with the nonprofit group Operation Safety Net, believes that BigBurgh.com has the potential to strengthen other types of relationships as well. "Sometimes the wider community takes a 'not in my backyard' attitude to the homeless, refusing to make eye contact with them or even calling 911 as though they were a nuisance to be swept away instead of fellow human beings," he says. "I think one of the primary reasons for that type of behavior is that people simply don't know how they can help. The problems of the homeless can seem insurmountable to the average bystander. But if someone can access BigBurgh.com

when they see a homeless person in need, they have a very concrete, practical way to help, and that's a very empowering thing. People, on the whole, really do want to help when they can."

Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation's Golden adds, "BigBurgh is easy to use and was created for both people in need and for those in a position to help them. The community response to BigBurgh tells me that it is a service that will make a positive difference in the lives of many people."

Besides its ease of use and comprehensiveness, early users have pointed out that among BigBurgh.com's key attributes is that it's updated regularly; if a shelter changes its policies or a medical clinic shutters operations, those changes are reflected in a timely manner. "You can't treat a service like this as a shiny new trinket and then lose interest in it," Firth cautions. "From the beginning, we budgeted for regular maintenance and updating. The fact is that if a user gets bad, out-of-date information once or twice, they'll just stop accessing the site altogether." To avoid that, Firth and his staff repeatedly call and email the service providers listed on the site, and once a week they make in-person visits to several providers on a rotating basis. "You can't wait for a social service worker to contact you with updated information," he says. "They're stretched

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way too thin to add another task to their calendar, so we take it upon ourselves instead."

Not Just for Pittsburgh

Before developing BigBurgh.com, Firth, Lagana, and the HCEF studied the websites and apps available to the homeless in other cities and discovered only five, including Link-SF, which was launched by a tech company in San Francisco as part of a community benefits agreement when it located in a historically impoverished neighborhood. Such agreements give companies benefits like tax breaks and require the companies to give back to the community, either in volunteer hours, as was the case with the company that designed Link-SF, or other ways. Those apps, however, typically rely on self-reporting by agencies and services, rather than implementing a program of regular outreach for updates. While BigBurgh.com itself is colorful and splashy, during its development, more emphasis was placed on what Lagana terms the less glamorous "back office" aspect, which ensures that it provides the most useful information in the most efficient way.

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"Thanks to cloud platforms, it's now relatively easy and inexpensive to develop high-quality, user-friendly apps," Firth asserts. "Given a strong enough commitment from interested community and government partners, there's little reason that a service like BigBurgh.com couldn't be replicated in other areas of the country with just as much success."

Government Incubates Creativity and Funds Results

BigBurgh.com has high profile advocates in Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto, who has long made ending homelessness a priority of his administration, and Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald. When Lagana first demonstrated the site for the pair, the excited mayor called in all his staffers to witness the demonstration and has pledged government support to maintain the site once the two-year, philanthropically-funded trial period is completed.

"I challenged other organizations to take on the issue of homelessness in Pittsburgh and Alleghany County," says Mayor Peduto. "The launch and implementation of this app is an innovative example of HCEF's leadership in that challenge, and I applaud its ongoing efforts."

Fitzgerald characterized BigBurgh.com as "an invaluable tool for assisting those who are experiencing homelessness, as well as providing a resource for law enforcement and social services personnel." Other officials have lined up in support too. Soon-to-retire Allegheny County Superintendent of Police Charles Moffatt has declared that BigBurgh.com would be "a true asset to officers in the field while assisting the homeless."

Grace Enick, now studying social work at Chatham University and serving as the coordinator of an art program and exhibit that features the work of youth experiencing homelessness, is equally excited and tells everyone she can about BigBurgh.com. "It would be great to see something developed right here in Pittsburgh spread throughout the country," she says. "It could change a lot more lives." ■

Resources

Homeless Children's Education Fund http://homelessfund.org/ Pittsburgh, PA ■ Pittsburgh Bureau of Police http://pittsburghpa.gov/police/ Pittsburgh, PA ■ Informing Design http://www.informingdesign.com/ Pittsburgh, PA ■ Operation Safety Net https://www.pittsburghmercy.org/operation-safety-net/ Pittsburgh, PA ■ Allegheny County http://www.alleghenycounty.us/ Pittsburgh, PA ■ Link SF http://www.link-sf.com/ San Francisco, CA ■ Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation http://foundationcenter.org/grantmaker/childguidance/index.html Pittsburgh, PA.