

# Clicking for change

*How social services and technology are coming together to help people on the streets*

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It seems there's always "an app for that." They range from the practical — paying for parking, communicating with friends, navigating a new area — to what some might deem absurd — an app that helps you track all the places you've pooped is a fine example.

More and more, entrepreneurs are looking to harness technology in another area: helping people in need. In the last few years, there has been a surge in apps, social media pages and websites that aim to address gaps in services for those experiencing homelessness.

They are cropping up all over the world, and they represent a merger of tech and social services.

Take WeCount, for instance, an app launched June 1 in Seattle to facilitate peer-to-peer donation of needed items. It was founded by Graham Pruss, an expert researcher who studied homelessness and vehicle residency with experience in outreach work; and Jonathan Sposato, an investor, tech entrepreneur and founder of multiple startups.

"What happens if we take all the same sorts of skill sets we apply to the creation of consumer internet applications and social media, and marry that to someone who has been thinking about these social issues for years?" Sposato said. "What is the kind of alchemy you can get?"

The answer might be in San Francisco, where HandUp enables users to donate to campaigns created by nonprofits. Or Portland, where PDXShelter helps people find nearby shelter and get real-time info about space and amenities. Studies have shown that smartphones are increasingly considered a lifeline and priority for those living on the street, especially for youth, and that a majority of homeless people have access to Wi-Fi via their own devices or through places such as public libraries.

As entrepreneurs bring new ideas to the table, they traverse a complex set of challenges — privacy, safety and the ultimate question of how we ensure technology brings us together rather than drives us apart.

On the surface, apps serve some kind of simple, practical function: They help people donate goods with a few swipes, offer funds to an individual at the click of a button or rapidly gather volunteers. In a network of nonprofits and agencies that are often under-resourced, that kind of crowdfunding capacity can be a game-changer.

JustServe, a website and app affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, allows potential volunteers to search for projects by ZIP code. It has

100,000 registered volunteers, 15,000 posted projects and 190,000 service hours performed, said Doneen DeMeester, representative of the program.

A search of the Seattle area pulls up opportunities to provide hot meals at the tent city in Interbay, prep summer lunches for kids through the Hunger Intervention Project, offer engineering and construction skills for new low-income senior housing, or respond to calls on helplines.

"You think, 'OK, where do I start?'" DeMeester said. "This offers it to you on a silver platter. You don't have to sift through multiple websites to find a project close to you. It's one button and you're there."

Slightly beneath the surface, some apps have potential to connect users with social services and long-term help.

WeCount matches those who need an item, such as a tent, sleeping bag or laptop, with someone who can provide it, similar to a Buy Nothing group where people make requests for or offer free items. But by using staffed, third-party drop-off and pick-up locations at social service organizations throughout Seattle, it also aims to expose people to services they may not have been aware of, Pruss said.

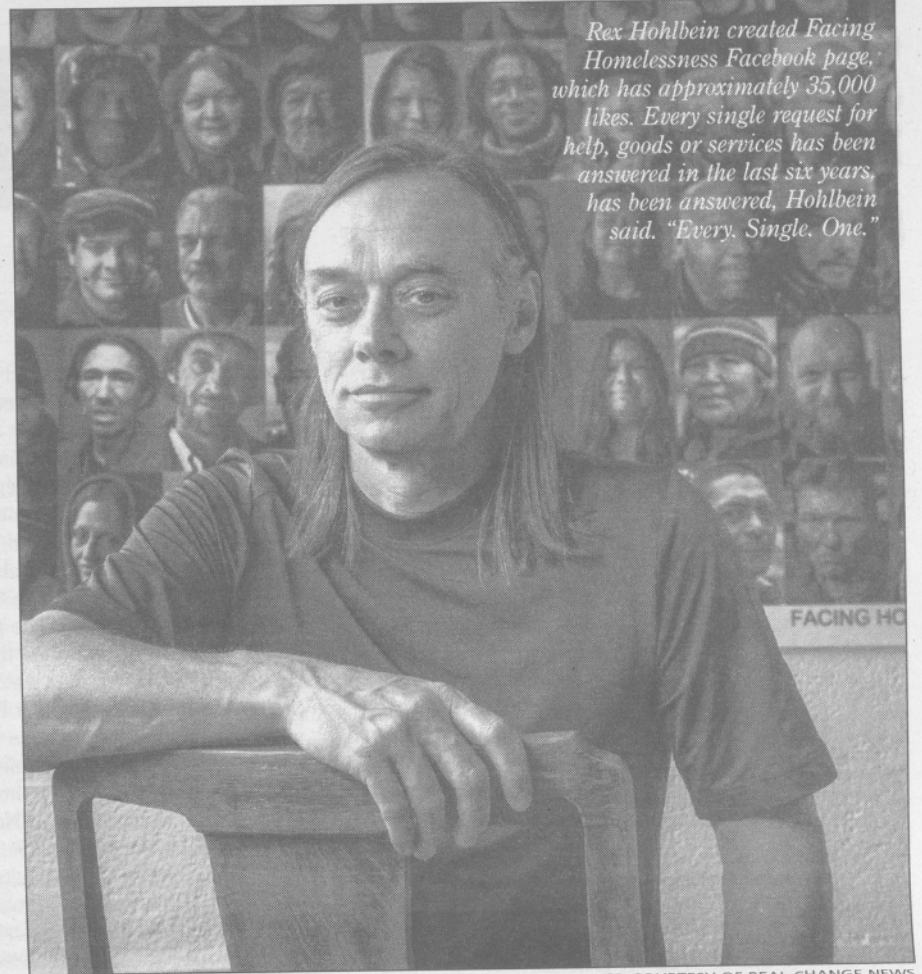
GiveSafe is an app created by Jonathan Kumar to make it easy to give cashless donations to a person who can use the money at participating stores, such as restaurants, coffee houses, barbers and job-consulting firms, or meet with a case manager who can access the funds. The app relies heavily on users forming relationships with nonprofits.

Kumar is still gathering users before the official launch, but in practice, organizations distribute tiny Bluetooth beacons. When a passerby with the app comes within range of a beacon holder, they get a push notification with a bit of the person's story and the option to donate \$1 or more. The beacon holders must be reactivated once a month at a partnering nonprofit.

Creators of these apps are all motivated by a strong sense that, given the right tools, people will choose to help.

For the founders of JustServe, it was a hope to inspire more action around Jesus Christ's teaching to "love thy neighbor as thyself." For Pruss, it was the dichotomy of the haves and have-nots. On one side, he observed overconsumption — his own bag of old cell phones, for example — and on the other he saw scarcity among people with great need. For Kumar, it was a desire to change an interaction between passersby and panhandlers that often seemed full of friction, judgment and discomfort.

"It was, 'What can I do about this interaction that happens on a daily or weekly basis, where they see someone in need and choose not to help?'" Kumar said. "Because they don't have cash, or they don't have time, or they don't think cash will help, or their car isn't in the right lane, or they



Rex Hohlbein created Facing Homelessness Facebook page, which has approximately 35,000 likes. Every single request for help, goods or services has been answered in the last six years, has been answered, Hohlbein said. "Every. Single. One."

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have a green light, or they don't believe the person really needs help. There's just a million things that get in the way of showing compassion."

If technology is going to make the world a better place it must do more than increase donations. There is always a flip-side. If donating a dollar is as simple as a drag and a tap, do we miss out on potential human interaction? If we want to create meaningful connections and relationships that inspire change, can technology do that?

Rex Hohlbein, founder of Facing Homelessness, uses a Facebook page and Instagram to disseminate powerful photos and stories with the goal of breaking down negative stereotypes. The challenge, he said, is ensuring technology does more than appease a sense of guilt, that it doesn't lead to what some might call "clicktivism."

"The danger is that we think the task is just to provide the product or the service, but that's only part of it," Hohlbein said. "It could keep us in a cycle where we keep all this in our heads and not in our hearts. Where we go, I've seen a lot of charts, read a lot of reports, watched a lot of news, and I donate a sleeping bag through this app once a month. And therefore, I'm doing something.' Yes, You are. But I think you might have just ducked out a little early."

Kumar said it's ultimately up to the user. In some cases, GiveSafe will simply be a mechanism to donate a quick dollar that otherwise might not be given, he said. But he also believes the app can be "step one" in fostering trust and connection. The first screen that a user engages with reads "Break the ice," and offers interesting tidbits about the beacon holder, maybe their favorite sports team or that they were a pro

ice skater.

WeCount has erred on the side of caution to avoid compromising safety and anonymity, and has created its app after months of intensive research. For the moment, they are focusing on the core purpose of facilitating donations, but Pruss believes that alone generates something bigger by making people feel empowered to help their community.

"When a person requests an item and another gives, it creates a sense of goodwill and grace," he said. "I would say anytime someone asks for something and someone gives, we consider that a win: That is what underlies the positive political will that it takes to fund programs that help with poverty."

The point? No one wants the journey to end on a screen.

"I think the message is that they are beginning points, and not to think of them as end points," Hohlbein said. "They are the beginning of a hard journey. And it's important not to let ourselves off the hook — to think we've done something and step away. It's a journey that if we are going to live a beautiful life, should continue to get deeper and deeper. The app is a tool, not a solution."

If technology is only a tool, it is a powerful one. On the Facing Homelessness Facebook page, which has around 35,000 likes, every single request for help, goods or services has been answered in the last six years, Hohlbein said.

"Every. Single. One. I refer to it as this crazy empathy wishing well. I always think to myself, 'Oh my god, is this going to be answered? And always, just like that, 'Boom.' It has blown me away."

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