

HOMELESS YOUTH ON THE RAN

Local technology helps intervene with homeless youth

When Miya Longworth ran away from a dangerous foster situation in California at only 16 years old, she ended up on the streets of Eugene. She did her best to manage high school while couch surfing, but spent her junior year burdened by homelessness.

At that same time, September of 2015, Eugene City Manager Jon Ruiz was working with community members to rethink how the city was handling the issue of youth homelessness. “We decided to focus on generating a movement and a new expectation for our community,” Ruiz says, “rather than just creating another organization on the landscape of the problem.”

To generate a movement, a group of individuals from various organizations and backgrounds came together to form 15th Night, named with the hope that no youth will spend more than 14 consecutive nights on the street. That is the point they’re more likely to become chronically homeless, according to Looking Glass Community Services.

15th Night developers then presented the issue of youth homelessness as a “challenge” at the February 2016 Technology Association of Oregon’s Hack for a Cause. Multiple teams spent the weekend generating ways that technology could be used to combat the issue, and two University of Oregon students created the “Rapid Access Network,” known now as the RAN.

“The basic premise of the event is to show that technology can be part of the solution to some of the challenges that our community is facing,” Matt Sayre of TAO and Hack for a Cause says. “It is evident that when technology is present and people in the tech community come together, amazing things can happen — and the RAN is a great example.”

By way of the RAN, 15th Night encompasses a “collective impact model,” utilizing resource and service providers that already exist in Eugene to streamline the process of getting help for homeless youth.

The RAN process begins when an “advocate” — trained representatives including school counselors, nurses, public librarians, city of Eugene staff — sees a child who has a need. They log onto the RAN, type in the child’s gender and age, select the need from a simple drop-down menu and then submit to send an “alert.”

The alert is immediately sent, via text message and email, to each provider who has declared him or herself able to meet it. If the need is for clothing, for example, all providers who have clothing to give are notified, and one will bring that clothing over immediately.

“The technology makes it all happen immediately, in real time,” 15th Night coordinator Megan Shultz says.

In the rare case that an alert isn’t closed within 24 hours, Shultz steps in herself, using the network to send the alert again, this time to the “second parachute” of providers — other people within the community who have volunteered to help.

“People in our community come to us wanting to help, so we’ve been able to create this second tier of resource

providers for the cases that don’t get met as immediately,” Shultz says. “They get the alert directly from me, and these people — just citizens of Eugene — step in and make it happen.”

The hope, Shultz says, is that the immediate responses create a way to intervene, providing youth the resources they need before they head to the streets, which has been “otherwise seemingly impossible without this.”

The RAN debuted in September of last year, and within the first few weeks a school counselor recognized Longworth’s situation and sent out an alert for a youth advocate. This is the most common request; according to data collected by 15th Night, advocates have been requested more than 20 times.

“Someone to just stand alongside these youth and help in a variety of ways is something so many of our youth need,” Shultz says. “Along with all of the other resources,

“I know that even in the worst-case scenario, people have used the RAN to get kids sleeping bags in the chance they do have to spend a night on the street,” Longworth says. “Which, believe me, is better than nothing.”

To accommodate the frequent requests for shelter, 15th Night has partnered with A Family for Every Child and is actively recruiting “host homes” — families in the community who are willing to take in homeless youth on short notice, allowing them a safe place to stay while their other needs are sorted out.

“We have a network of people in the community who can take a youth in to provide that safety and security, which also helps create the spaces to get them services while being in a safe space,” Shultz says. “It’s a value to us as a community to be adapting to be meeting these diverse needs, all thanks to this technology.”

At the RAN’s one-year anniversary, 15th Night’s developers say they are using the technology to “be innovative, think outside the box, and figure out how to get anyone and everyone from the community involved.”

In early June, they created business cards with a 24/7 hotline for kids to attain 15th Night’s resources without needing to go through a liaison. Youth can text or call the number to reach a representative from White Bird, one of 15th Night’s partners, who will then send out an immediate alert, after which the requests are fulfilled in the same fashion.

Longworth, now a member of 15th Night’s Youth Advisory Council, has passed out cards herself. “We don’t want to let anyone slip through without getting the help that the RAN provides,” she says. “I want every kid who needs help to take advantage of this.”

Currently, 15th Night is dividing up Eugene into different “catchment areas” that can use the RAN on an even more localized scale.

The catchment areas, located around Eugene’s schools, will have “all of the access and resources needed in one place, to help each area to take care of their own kids,” Shultz says. South Eugene High School will act as the pilot for this year, and the hope is to create a “catchment toolkit” to give to other schools next fall.

“If we continue to perfect this technology to have all of these resources and services centered around every school in Eugene, these small movements will then equal a big movement,” Ruiz says.

15th Night plans to eventually perfect the technology enough to share it beyond Eugene, allowing other cities to equip their youth with immediate resources and services.

Longworth is now in stable housing, working and teaching herself the art of animation — her plan is to create cartoons that will not only help children understand whether they’re living in unsafe situations, but also include “subliminal help messages and resources within them, helping kids find a way out.”

“We have this technology that no one else uses, and it’s allowing us to tackle youth homelessness differently,” Ruiz says. “We are willing to use and adapt the RAN based on what’s going to work, and that’s what is different than the way we looked at this problem before — and it’s key.” ■

For immediate help, resources and services, call or text 541-246-4046 to reach a 15th Night representative 24/7. To get involved or find out more information about 15th Night, visit 15night.org. Additional reporting by Addison Prentice, Victoria Robitaille and Megan Rouse.

This story was developed as part of the Catalyst Journalism Project at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication. Catalyst brings together investigative reporting and solutions journalism to spark action and response to Oregon’s most perplexing issues. To learn more visit journalism.uoregon.edu/catalyst or follow the project on Twitter @UO_catalyst.

‘We have this technology that no one else uses, and it’s allowing us to tackle youth homelessness differently.’

— EUGENE CITY MANAGER JON RUIZ



CARD HANDED OUT TO YOUTH IN NEED OF SERVICES

the RAN can help get them that.”

Longworth was connected to Jade Chamness, a youth advocate with Direction Services. Chamness worked with Longworth to find more stable housing with Looking Glass’s Station 7, and later sent RAN alerts to help her receive everything from a bike for transportation to food, clothing and shelter again later on.

“I thought 15th Night would be another program or group that didn’t really do anything,” Longworth says. “But how the RAN works makes it different.”

According to the data, shelter and clothing were also frequently requested: At least 19 kids requested clothing and shoes and 16 kids requested shelter in the RAN’s first year.