

Two Tools to Help University District Homeless Youth Overcome Employment Barriers

Abstract: *The employment barriers for homeless young persons in Seattle's University District are not unique to this cohort. The problems this group faces moving from homelessness to employment are similar to challenges facing the entire homeless population in Seattle, as documented in Seattle's 2009 needs assessment of homelessness study.¹ In response to stated needs by representatives of homeless youth in the University District, print and digital materials were developed to assist this group overcome barriers to employment. An evaluation of print information distributed by neighborhood service providers acknowledges a need for improvement as well as a need to explore ways that youth can take advantage of digital tools to gain employment². Our materials assist youth in building an online community dedicated to sharing information about employment and managing the wide yet fragmented range of services in the neighborhood and throughout Seattle.*

Employment Barriers for Homeless Young Persons in the University District:

On Nov. 14, representatives of the University District-based homeless advocacy group UD-ASKANK met with a delegation from the University of Washington's Community Oriented Public Health Practice program.³ The UD-ASKANK members identified problems they faced seeking employment. Those issues included:

- **Lack of proper identification; how can those without ID can get their IDs replaced;**
- **Lack of facilities to store personal belongings during the day;**
- **Lack of proper job interview clothing;**
- **Access to hygiene, shower, and laundry facilities;**
- **Paying for transportation to areas outside of the University District;**
- **Criminal records that make it hard to pass background checks and obtain housing;**
- **Connecting with employment programs that are already at capacity;**
- **Navigating the multiples services scattered in the district and beyond.**

The concerns presented by the five-person delegation from UD-ASKANK are not unique to homeless youth and young adults in the University District. The City of Seattle's 2009 needs assessment of homelessness study noted that food and hygiene facilities were the most commonly used services among the city's homeless. The study of nearly 300 homeless individuals found nearly half used meal programs and half reported using hygiene centers.¹ One online resource called HomelessAmerican.com, whose author reports having been homeless, details the hurdles any homeless person young or old face trying to move to employment. They include transportation, keeping clean, and having storage. "Any indoor work demands being clean and outdoor labor work requires being able to clean up afterward. Having to sleep outside in your clothes doesn't help. Some places provide showers for the homeless, but due to location and time they are unavailable to most in need. Getting appropriate clean clothes is a major problem."⁴

Presently, the delivery of services to the district's homeless youth is fragmented. Providers

include public, religious, and nonprofit programs. Our group's survey counted nearly 25 organizations. Together, they provide a range of services: hygiene, transitional housing, employment and life-skills coaching, meals, medical care, case management, and more. However, services overlap at different locations on different days.

The city's 2009 homeless needs assessment also noted that two-thirds of those surveyed learned about available services by word of mouth or on the street, compared to just one in 10 learning of services from an agency or program.¹ This finding suggests a possible communication disconnect between homeless and the dozens of service providers working with this population. While the study did not suggest why this occurred, the proliferation and fragmentation of service providers likely contributes to communication barriers. In a survey of homeless youth interventions, Slesnick et al. notes that "fragmented service provision" is frequently cited as a barrier for homeless youth and that integrating services through one provider might be better than those working parallel to each other.⁵

King County's analysis of homelessness, as part of its 10-year-plan, suggests that the principal players streamline services that offer health care, mental health, and substance abuse services and training.⁶ It is not clear what "streamlining" means in the Seattle and University District context, given that faith-based and private sources provide fiscal, in-kind, and volunteer resources needed to sustain the nearly two-dozen providers in the University District alone.

Helping homeless young people overcome barriers to employment also must be seen in the context of the larger problem facing the homeless in Seattle and King County. The city's homeless needs assessment study found that six in 10 of respondents said they were working or looking for work, and few had income. The study concluded employment was sporadic or limited. The study suggested that more resources should be directed to help link homeless persons to day labor or intermittent work. These were offered as starting points to enter the workforce.¹

To assess employment obstacles facing the homeless, our group contacted leaders of service providers serving young adults and youth from the University District.⁷⁻⁹ They singled out mental health issues and substance abuse as the two largest barriers for their clients seeking employment. Their comments are consistent with the 2009 findings from the city's homeless needs assessment. More than one-third of the homeless surveyed reported receiving mental health treatments during the previous year. Those who were receiving mental health treatments also were more likely to be incarcerated, all consistent with similar national findings.¹⁰ The National Coalition on Homelessness reports that mental illnesses, along with a history of incarceration, creates barriers for employment among homeless people.¹¹

Print Resources, Card

Given the short timeframe to develop an action plan, our group decided to focus on solutions that could be put to use immediately. We developed an online resource website and a printed resource guide because we know that not all homeless youth are connected to the internet, and there is not always internet availability even for those who do use the internet. A print resource guide would allow homeless youth to carry around a guide with them that they could look up resources for quick reference. Furthermore, the print resource guide connects the youth with the

internet site if they want more information on the various services listed on the card.

During our informant interviews as well as individual research on resources and services in the Seattle area, we compiled a list of organizations that we believed were the most useful. However, we want to use our meeting with UD-ASKANK on Nov. 23, to find out what they think about the resources that we have identified and modify the guide according to their feedback. The December 9th meeting will be a more finalized version of the tool with UD-ASKANK’s input.

Additionally, though we did find out that the Street Youth Ministries organization has a flyer for services in the University District, the flyer does not specifically focus on employment issues. Our resource guide differs because of this and also because it includes resources beyond the University District, and it also provides names of organizations that assist individuals over the age of 23.

The National Cancer Institute and Boston University Medical Center have guidelines for developing effective print materials.^{12,13} Though homeless youth will vary greatly in their literacy level, designing a tool that can communicate effectively to individuals with low-literacy is often not detrimental to the effectiveness of the tool with individuals who have average or good reading skills; in fact, simple and clear messages can be appreciated by all readers.¹² The steps that the guideline recommends are to:¹²

Define the target audience	Homeless youth in the University District and problems with employment; specifically interacting with UD-ASKANK
Conduct target audience research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographics: wide age range, mostly males, wide range of education level, residence varies (streets, shelters, transitional housing, etc.) • Barriers to employment (as voiced by youth): lack of places to shower and do laundry, lack of interview clothing, problems obtaining proof of identification, past CORIs and charges make it difficult to pass background checks, discrimination by employers due to lack of home address, most programs are at capacity, lack of facilities to store personal items, lack of transportation outside U District
Develop a concept for the product	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Objective: help break down barriers precluding homeless youth from obtaining employment • Key information points: chose from barriers UD-ASKANK voiced (shower and laundry facilities, interview clothing, reduced bus passes, programs that help with obtaining IDs, programs that provide help in finding jobs and education, including those that directly hire homeless individuals • Appropriate presentation methods: a resource card that is not too big and sturdy enough to hold up against the elements; something that is available in color and black/white to keep costs down; map on the back of resource card to give a sense of distance between resources • Reading level: simple and clear with low-literacy level; fewer words will mean the guide will not be cluttered • Organize topics in way that individuals will use them: organized categories by age (since finding services for older individuals seemed difficult) as well as

	by area (most individuals like to stay close to where they know); map serves as good visual as explained above; website information provides more information to services
Develop content and visuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple clear words; print not too small to read • Color and bolding to highlight information
Pretest and revise draft materials	This pretest and revision will occur during and after the November 23 rd meeting with the members of UD-ASKANK to solicit feedback and next steps on the draft resource guide.

Social Media to Connect Youth Searching for Employment:

After considering feedback from the UD-ASKANK representatives, U-district service providers, and anecdotal information on the use of social media by the homeless, we honed in on four key ideas:

- Homeless youth and young adults describe a strong street culture and social network and value the connections they have with each other.
- Being homeless feels like a full-time job.³
- Youth who become homeless in 2010 are already consumers of social media.
- Social media websites can be used by voiceless or marginalized communities to tell their stories, gain attention, build stronger connections within their communities, and collaborate to solve problems in their communities.¹⁴⁻¹⁷

Based on these ideas, we explored methods of connecting youth online that can facilitate the way they gain: a) leads on employment and b) networking and technical skills useful for employment. The goal is not to replace word-of-mouth advice or strong in-person ties, but to supplement and centralize information while strengthening ways youth can connect with each other around issues of employment.

We evaluated five different blogging or social media sites, using the following ideal criteria:

- The site can be used as a group or community blog that accepts entries from any person wishing to participate.
- Participation should be as simple as possible (e.g. does not require a login or specific account with a host site).
- The site can be easily customized and have publishing elements that make it highly organized.
- The site has intuitive navigation. A site administrator should be able to modify the site without having any significant technical experience.
- The site can be searched and archived for future users.

The review of each site can be found in Appendix A. Based on this evaluation, we determined that Posterous would be the best platform on which to build our social network.

The Posterous Work Resources Demo Site:

Currently, we have a “demo” site available for testing by UD-ASKANK members. We see ourselves as their designers; thus, their feedback on content and layout will inform how we proceed next. The demo site has been populated with enough information to give a test user as

close to a real navigation experience as possible. In its current form, we believe the website accomplishes the following:

- Promotes OWNERSHIP and SELF-SUFFICIENCY. The site does not require a skilled administrator. Editing, moderation, and contributions are user generated and maintained.
- Provides SUPPLEMENTATION. As previously stated, the site supplements and centralizes information shared between youth in person.
- Promotes CONNECTION. The site can be a way for any youth accessing a computer to be a part of a social network.
- Encourages COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION. Any person with interest and an email address can contribute information to the site. This includes youth, services providers, and potential employers.

The User Experience:

The demo website is best experienced live: <http://workresources.posterous.com>. The table below provides a summary of some of the key page elements.

How This Works	The home page with an explanation of the site’s purpose and instructions on how any interested person can contribute information.
FAQ	Commonly asked questions related to employment, e.g. “What if I have a criminal background?”
Resources	A growing body of links, lists of service providers, and maps of service providers in the U-district and beyond. This section focuses on resources for employment and links to SCN’s more comprehensive crisis list.
Job Board	This is the main feature of the site. Users can send in information about job tips, advice, recommendations for employment agencies, and comment on each other’s posts.

Next Steps

To complete this project by December 9th and leave it in a stage where UD-ASKANK or other interested parties can assume full control, we will:

1. Solicit feedback from UD-ASKANK (and others) and incorporate changes to website and print materials.
2. Volunteer some time to provide UD-ASKANK with a tutorial on how to administer the website and modify print materials, if desired.
3. Provide Joe Mabel, site administrator for the SCN Crisis Directory, with fact-checked information about service providers. Recruit more volunteers (especially from COPHP) to provide Joe with updated, fact-checked information.
4. Contact the U-district librarian to see if she is interested in maintaining the website and keeping print resources updated.¹⁷
5. Contact Jill Woelfer, who runs the “iPod class” to see if students in her class can learn how to use Posterous and contribute to the site content. She is also an academic researcher, who can provide useful feedback on the use of information technology and social media in service of connecting homeless or low-income youth.²
6. Create video tutorials/explanation of how the website works, or see if students or youth can learn how to make these tutorials.

7. Follow up with Woelfer and service providers regarding the idea that “the use of [social media seems] to be perceived to reinforce a ‘street life’ identity, making it even more difficult to leave the street.”²

8. Address safety concerns associated with social media.

Conclusion/Back to the Case:

Day 2 of the case asked our group to help homeless youth in finding employment. The need for jobs in the University District homeless youth population is not different than the needs of homeless individuals in other communities. In one paper, clients at homelessness services were asked to name three things that they currently needed the most, and the majority of individuals (42%) stated “finding a job.”¹⁸

Various papers have found that with appropriate support and trainings, homeless individuals, including those with mental illness and substance abuse, can successfully find and continue employment through integrated employment settings.¹⁹ Furthermore, employment can be a stabilizing factor and unemployment contributes to even worse health.²⁰ Unfortunately, the traditional approach of fragmented services for the homeless has proven to fail one of the most vulnerable populations.^{19,20}

A report by the Seattle/King County’s Taking Health Care Home Initiative found that though there are some effective programs that provide comprehensive employment services for the homeless, the resources “fall far short of the need.”²⁰ The report stresses that King County has missed opportunities in planning for employment services that serve homeless individuals and that there needs to be “a flexible combination of housing, supportive services and employment” for homeless individuals to break out of the cycle of homelessness.²⁰ Furthermore, the report states that these services need to be connected with substance abuse and mental health treatment, which are key factors to address in order for many homeless individuals to remain employed.

In our own research to try to find resources in the community that could help the homeless youth in UD-ASKANK, we encountered this fragmented system head on. The system was hard for us to navigate, and there were sometimes contradicting information given to us from providers. With such a system, it is no wonder that the youth in UD-ASKANK find it nearly impossible to navigate the disjointed programs. Because we only had two weeks, we were not able to delve fully into attacking the root causes of homelessness or unemployment within the homeless population. Our main focus was to talk to providers, fact check, and try to make navigating the system at least a little bit easier. What the homeless population really needs is coordinated care: care that provides linkages between multiple services such as mental health, housing, employment, substance use, education and skills training, as well as medical care. Some cities have already implemented programs that try to tackle homelessness in an integrated manner.²⁰ In order to alleviate the many health problems associated with being homeless, Seattle has to start building programs based on models that allow homeless individuals to find all the resources they need in a “one stop shop.”

REFERENCES

1. *Seattle Homeless Needs Assessment 2009*2009.
2. Woelfer J, Hendry D. Homeless Young People's Experiences with Information Systems: Life and Work in a Community Technology Center. *CHI 2010: HCI for All*. Atlanta, GA2010.
3. Meeting with UD-ASKANK and Community-Oriented Public Health Practice delegation, at University Presbyterian Church, Seattle, Wash.November 16, 2010.
4. Homelessamerican.com. 2010; <http://homelessamerican.com/>. Accessed November 21, 2010.
5. Slesnick N, Dashora P, Letcher A, Erdem G, Serovich J. A Review of Services and Interventions for Runaway and Homeless Youth: Moving Forward. *Child Youth Serv Rev*. Jul 2009;31(7):732-742.
6. Homelessness: how is King County doing? 2010; <http://your.kingcounty.gov/aimshigh/search2.asp?HHHomelessness>. Accessed November 19, 2010.
7. Interview with Rowena Harper, Executive Director, Street Youth MinistriesNovember 16, 2010.
8. Interview with Jeff Stein, Employment & Education Program Manager, Orion CenterNovember 16, 2010.
9. Interview with Megan Gibbard, Executive Director, University Street MinistryNovember 16, 2010.
10. Homeless Young Adult Treatment Admissions. *The TEDS Report*. July 1, 2010.
11. Employment and homelessness. July 2009; <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/employment.html>. Accessed November 21, 2010.
12. National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health. *Clear and Simple: Developing effective Print Materials for Low-Literate Readers*: National Cancer Institute;1998.
13. School BUM. Designing Effective Printed Educational Materials: Session Guide. *Session Guide* http://dcc2.bumc.bu.edu/prdu/Session_Guides/designing_effective_printed_material_session_guide.htm. Accessed November 22, 2010, 2010.
14. Hendricks K. 6 Ways Social Media Is Helping the Homeless. *Halogen*2010.
15. Brown D. Making Homelessness Visible Through Social Media. *Danny Brown: The Human Side of Media and the Social Side of Marketing*.
16. Raymond J. Social Media — the Best Defense Against Homelessness? *Tonic*. Vol November 21, 20102010.
17. Homeless shouldn't mean hard-to-reach. *connect2change.org*2010.
18. Lam JA, Rosenheck RA. Correlates of improvement in quality of life among homeless persons with serious mental illness. *Psychiatr Serv*. Jan 2000;51(1):116-118.

19. Marrone J. Creating Hope Through Employment for People Who are Homeless or in Transitional Housing. *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation*. 2005;8(4):13-35.
20. Lieberman B, Putnam M, Rumpf B, Shamseldin T, Rio J. *Developing Community Employment Pathways For Homeless Job Seekers in King County and Washington State. A Report of the Taking Health Care Home Initiative*. Seattle: Taking Health Care Home Initiative;2007.

Appendix A. Review of social media sites to use as an employment-related social network

Website	Pros	Cons
Any social media site	can be archived and searched by new people needing information; connects people who are disconnected from in person networks; one more link for street community; way to link service providers, employers, youth in non-hierarchical way since anyone contributes (and youth can maintain site)	requires contributions; ideally long term person to keep track of site as main contributor
Posterous	can email posts directly to site, can reply via email; can be set up as a group site with multiple contributors; one central email address for posting; relatively user friendly and easy; has a search function; contributors can post without moderation but they don't get access to the site password; mostly everything can be done via email instead of having to log on to another site (this avoids having to create a new name and keeping track of a password); customizability of domain name and theme; can post ANY file format; posts emailed in from other people can be kept anonymous	if posting is open access, someone needed to moderate comments; other pages don't have separate posting/commenting so that can only happen on home page
Facebook	can be extension of current UD-ASKANK page; youth are familiar with Facebook	new Groups design – this may no longer be an option; posting requires login and membership; old interface may disappear to give way to new one; new interface is terrible, doesn't support any kind of organization; pages may be an option but requires heavy moderation
Blogger	customizable privacy settings; can have multiple authors; approved authors can mail text posts directly to the site; most customizability for professional use; well known, lots of support; linked directly to gmail address	need tech savvy person to be in charge of maintaining the site; authors have to be added to the site by site administrator
Tumblr	nearly identical pros and cons of Posterous; can call in an audio recording; well known and will continue to get support	can't organize by tabs or pages; dashboard requires a little more tech savvy; non-intuitive site to send post emails (e.g. brebeow383@tumblr.com); phone call to post has to come from known number
Weebly	Highly customizable; strong, intuitive WYSIWYG editing features	Not set up to have group blogging features