

Safety Net Assistance Network

A network of churches and a network of community agencies come together

Location

Berkeley, Charleston and Dorchester Counties, SC

How did it start?

Recognition that two existing networks were on the same path

How is it maintained?

Co-administrated by Trident United Way and Human Needs Network

Network Size

39 Agencies & Churches during six month pilot stage

Key Audiences

- Leaders looking to form a collaborative human need response network in their city
- Existing collaborations or networks looking for tools to enhance their work
- Collaboratives looking to create a distributed network of care in their city

Key Learnings

- Collaboration begins with conversation
- Existing networks provide a strong foundation for CharityTracker to succeed
- Effective training can bring clarity to the vision
- Ask the right questions of the right people
- Don't be afraid to take action and get started
- A large number of churches and agencies can work together

Charleston Makes the List

Charleston makes the list—a lot of lists, in fact. It was named a Top 25 Art Destination by American Style Magazine; it also has a large number of award-winning restaurants and hi-end shopping. It is a top tourist attraction in America and the state of South Carolina. ⁱ With over 600,000 residents in a three-county area it is one of larger metropolitan areas in the United States.

Charleston is nicknamed America's "Holy City," as the city skyline is dotted with steeples from a variety of denominations. In fact, it was one of the few cities in the original thirteen colonies to provide religious tolerance to certain faiths and denominations. ⁱⁱ There are literally thousands of churches in a three-county area. Interestingly, this "Holy City" makes yet another list: the North Charleston Statistical Metropolitan Area ranked #21 out of 338 on the 2008 Metropolitan Crime Rating Report. ⁱⁱⁱ



A city connected, a city divided

Located on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, this city is home to profitable ports bringing art and industry to America. That same water that connects can also divide, as it weaves into rivers, marshes and swamps. "There is something about the area being broken up by waterways. There is something about that breakup and having lots of bridges that creates interesting 'pockets'," shares Chuck Coward, Executive Director of Charleston Outreach.

And while Charleston boasts a rich economy of tourism and art collecting in one area, food insecurity and housing problems exist in another. "Our three county-area is very mixed. The average household income for this region in 2006 was \$64,131, but average is not a good indicator of the reality here. Our poverty here is predominately generational in nature and very hard to break. Hourly median is \$13.85 or \$28,808 gross income a year—and that is 40 hours a week with no vacation. We have high housing costs and a high level of veterans here. We have pockets of poverty. Instead of having this very large inner city like Harlem, poverty here is disbursed—urban, suburban and even rural," says Chuck.

This wide distribution of poverty causes special problems for service providers. Cathy Easley, Vice President of the Trident United Way (TUW), explains, "Trident United Way services a very large geographic area but all services are very centrally located. Transportation to receive help is just one problem. Our three-county area is both very affluent, yet with many dispersed areas of poverty."

With such a high need in a vast coverage area, how does this community build capacity to respond effectively to needs? With so many variables on their radar screen, agencies and churches in the Tri-county are coming together for the good of people in all areas of their region.

Safety Net- Connecting Agencies Together



Cathy Easley,
Trident United

“Trident United Way is one of the largest funders for basic needs in the Tri-county area,” says Cathy, who has served through Trident United Way for over 18 years and is the Vice President of Safety Net Services. Safety Net Services is the name Trident United Way uses to describe its community engaging work with providers of basic human need services such as food, clothing, shelter, utility and rental assistance. “The reason Safety Net services emerged was to help the community assist people in need,” Cathy says. By gathering agencies who provide those services together, a more comprehensive plan for the community could be developed.

Trident United Way volunteers from the community come together to form the Safety Net Vision Council. The council’s job is to produce a strategic plan, cast vision for the future, and be an advocate for collaborative response to human needs in the community. Because of her position Cathy attended many community meetings and held positions on many coalitions and partnerships. As she sat on these committees a theme began to present itself. The agencies that were a part of Safety Net did not begin to scratch the surface of the great need that was out there. “We needed to know what the true needs were to maximize our resources,” she says.

Human Needs Network- Connecting Churches Together

While TUW’s Safety Net Services was underway, another network was forming in Charleston. Charleston Outreach was evolving from an organization that hosted a number of summer short-term mission groups to serve the city, into a network of churches to do projects and provide services all year long. The Human Needs Network formed as a part of that organizational evolution. “We started thinking about how we could do a better job at mobilizing the local church 12 months out of the year as opposed to just facilitating these teams three months out of the year,” says Chuck. To understand long-term engagement in the city, Chuck began to insert himself on every community concerned board and council he could. “I wanted to really understand the entire community dynamic and how the churches could fit considering the gaps that existed amidst all the good that was already being done,” says Chuck.



Chuck
Coward,
Charleston
Outreach

He also went to individual agencies and asked them how the church could help build their capacity. “After they picked their jaw up off the floor, it was like a fire hydrant of issues and needs. I just listened and looked for patterns.” And patterns emerged. Two consistent themes were providing for basic needs and better case management.

Because Charleston Outreach has mobilized over 264,000 volunteers over 16 years, they have both credibility and trust. Chuck knew that Charleston Outreach was good at engaging the church for the good of the community. He just needed to work on translating that to the local level. Established credibility and trust have empowered that growing shift.

Safety Net Assistance Network- Connecting Agencies and Churches!

Chuck and Cathy met during a meeting about continuum of care in their community. As Chuck shared his passion to connect and train churches to provide services for basic human needs Cathy says, "I remember thinking to myself, 'I might have finally met the right person to help me connect with churches of the Tri-county!'" As it turned out, Chuck and Cathy found themselves serving together in a variety of arenas and realized they had a shared vision: to provide better care for people.

Talks and dreams of a bigger collaboration began to surface. What if churches and agencies were able to network with one another? What kind of continuum of care would be provided with such a vast network? What kind of data could be collected if everyone providing for basic human needs was involved? Today, Safety Net (agencies) and the Human Needs Network (churches) have formed into the **Safety Net Assistance Network**, a network creating great synergy of purpose and resources for the Tri-county. The Safety Net Assistance Network provides for three important needs of both agencies and churches:

- 1) sharing client data, so that they can more holistically care for people in need and reduce duplication of service
- 2) collect more comprehensive data on basic human needs being serviced in their city
- 3) build the capacity of both churches and agencies through specific training on meeting basic human needs with a vision of the best quality of life possible

The vision of the Safety Net Assistance Network is to move people from crisis to stability, to self-sustainability. The more agencies and churches work together, the stronger and tighter the weave of care becomes the greater the chances of success in handling situational and generational poverty. Helping people find the best quality of life possible leads to healthy and whole communities.

To obtain greater success, this new collaboration between churches and agencies needed a dynamic tool to bring them together.

Greater Synergy with CharityTracker

During their many conversations about collaboration and networking, Chuck and Cathy were learning that sharing client information was a vital piece of this work. Part of their two-year conversation was the need for an online database. They needed something that would enable both churches and agencies to share client information.

Chuck says, "I found this program called CharityTracker, by Simon Solutions, and it seemed to have everything we wanted and it seemed to be very cost effective. I told Cathy that it looked too good to be true. I asked her to take a look at it."

"It's so user-friendly and was the secure, dynamic, Web-based, tool we needed," says Cathy. After some investigation and a presentation to the Safety Net Vision Council, they were approved and funded to move forward with a pilot program using CharityTracker as their means of sharing client assistance records.

In March 2009, 60 people from 35 churches and agencies were trained on the system and became part of a six month pilot using this shared database. "Once this pilot is finished, we will open it up county-wide," says Chuck. Both Trident United Way and the Human Needs Network share responsibilities for building the network. "United Way will determine basic need programs and agencies to invite to be a part of this shared assistance record network. The Human Needs Network will be the gateway for churches to enter in to the dynamic," says Chuck.

How long did it take to get the CharityTracker pilot database off the ground? "We'd been talking about something like this for two years and within four months of finding CharityTracker we are launching it," says Chuck.

Why is a shared database for client assistance so important? The benefits are two-fold. According to Cathy and Chuck, CharityTracker gives churches and basic needs providers the ability to network with each other to find critical decision-making information for providing assistance. This information sharing reduces duplication of their efforts.

Secondly, using this system gives a picture of regional response to human needs. "Emergency assistance for people in need is #1 for Safety Net at the Trident United Way. It is our responsibility to help our community help people in need so it's crucial to know the resources being provided because it gives us the true picture of needs and helps us to maximize our resources. With this system we can," says Cathy.

Funding CharityTracker

While the CharityTracker system is affordable, it isn't free. This large, distributed network hasn't let cost stand in their way of piloting this effort to share information. Cathy says, "Trident United Way has fully funded the six month pilot of CharityTracker through a Strategic Grant." Beyond the six months, Cathy notes that the United Way has committed to partially funding CharityTracker collaboration for the next three years.

Chuck adds, "There is willingness for churches to help pay, but the annual fee for churches and agencies has not been determined. The plan is to keep cost to the agencies and churches minimal through a variety of funding streams. We are building success of the network before fees have to be paid by those using CharityTracker. After using this collaborative tool, they will know the value."

Training Churches & Agencies

Training has been an important part of both the agencies and churches involved in Safety Net Assistance Network. Training on the basics of using the CharityTracker system was led by CharityTracker staff at a local college. Chuck says, "That training experience was great! We have also been blessed with a relationship with a local college that has a nice computer lab (28 computers) that is very accessible for us for regular hands-on training with new partners." Two sessions were provided to choose from in a one-day setting.

In addition to training on CharityTracker, Trident United Way and the Human Needs Network have partnered to provide Human Crisis Response training for churches. "We pull churches together in those smaller pockets in the community and begin to strengthen specific parts of the Tri-county area in terms of the overall network. This is creating a foundation for a larger collaborative in those communities because of the relationships being established," says Chuck.

Overcoming challenges

Both Chuck and Cathy are overcoming one of their challenges by finding the right software for sharing assistance records among churches and agencies. "Our six month pilot with CharityTracker is teaching us a lot," says Cathy.

A second challenge has been agencies needing to report certain data that CharityTracker did not allow for. However, Chuck and Cathy have found the CharityTracker staff to be extremely helpful in adding some components. The most exciting adjustments to help with this challenge are yet to come in version 3, which the Safety Net Assistance Network is being asked to speak in to.

Another challenge is getting those not used to logging assistance information to do so in a timely manner. The principle used for the Safety Net Assistance Network is "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." If you want good and timely data, you provide good and timely data. The idea is that the best decisions will be made with all information regarding responses to a person or family's needs. "We communicate in our training an expectation to enter client data within no more than forty-eight (48) hours," says Chuck.

Collaboration is Worth the Challenge

March 23 2009 was the launch of Safety Net Assistance Network using CharityTracker. As of June 11, 2009, 2610 client records have been completed and 1426 have received over \$178,398 of assistance. Cathy says that each agency and church is now only a click away from obtaining their specific assistance statistics.

The Actions and Attitudes of a Collaborative Leader

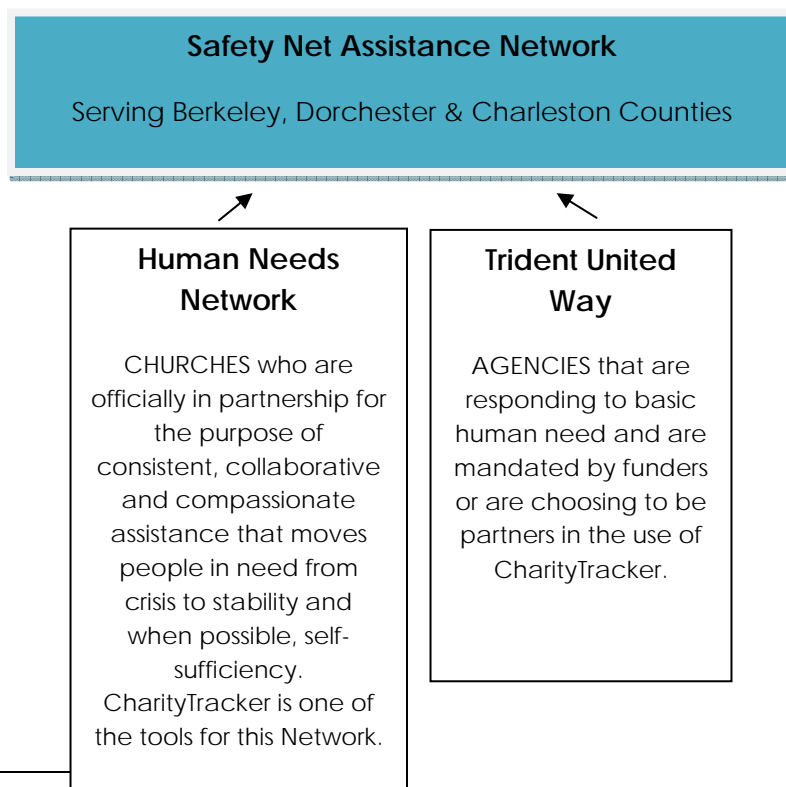
So, what kind of leader does it take to pull a collaboration of churches and agencies together with a vision as big as three counties? Chuck admits it is hard work. "You have to be determined, a collaborator, an instigator, and be willing to do a lot of 'process' thinking. You have to relate to people, have humility while at the same time maintaining a level of confidence.

If I run in to a brick wall I get up, shake it off and say ‘how do we dismantle this wall or go over, under or around it?’ Sometimes you also have to ask ‘Do I want to go to the other side?’”

He finds his role to be an investigator first, then implementer of the vision. “You have to be a listener and learn to navigate the arena where you have a sense you are going to operate. Find out about what is already going on and develop relationships to implement the vision,” advises Chuck.

Cathy, a passionate, caring person who believes in the unity of purpose to solve problems agrees that developing relationships is the key to collaborative work. “You need to be willing to listen and take time to build trust with people, agencies and churches. Always be open to partnership and collaboration!” she says.

CharityTracker Network Design for Safety Net Assistance Network



<http://www.americanstyle.com/ME2/dirmod.asp?sid=&type=gen&mod=Core+Pages&gid=D4BC7638393C45F5B69956570EB94649>

ⁱⁱ <http://charlestonharbortours.com/article.cfm?EditorialID=27&CategoryID=0>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://os.cqpress.com/citycrime/MetroCrime2008_Rank_Rev.pdf

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