Meet the Need with Technology:
Computer system links churches, agencies, needy in Winnebago and Boone Counties

Let’s say you worked 9 to 5 at your $10-an-hour job, and after you put the kids to bed, you start studying for your GED certificate. Things were moving forward that day as expected, until your refrigerator gave out. You don’t have the money to buy even a gently used one. So you go to the secretary at your church and ask whether she knows anyone who could help.

In days gone by, the secretary might make a dozen phone calls to see whether a parishioner has an extra refrigerator that’s not being used much. Or maybe she’d call several people in the church to see if they could chip in some cash to defray the cost of getting one. Then she’d probably have to find someone with a truck to get the appliance to you.

Fast forward to today. There’s a comparatively new computer system in town that aims to streamline these kinds of efforts. It promises not only to cut the church secretary’s search time but also to more efficiently connect those in churches across Winnebago and Boone counties with residents who need items and services in emergencies.

“There are so many resources and so many needs in the community, we need the technology to link them,” said Allan Barsema, founder and board member of One Body Collaboratives.

The nonprofit coordinates operation of the Meet the Need computer system. Its use is being expanded to triple the number of churches involved from about 100 churches to as many as 300 in the area. And social services providers increasingly are tying into the system to offer services. More volunteers throughout the community also are being recruited to tie into the efforts, including through Transform Rockford.

“There are a lot of resources sitting in the pews,” including counselors and trades people, Barsema told me. “ Churches have kitchens, office space, vans. ... We need to mobilize and coordinate church and faith resources. There is a lot of need, and resources are dwindling” especially in programs funded by the state, he said.

“We want to help the church be the church and get outside the four walls and be active in the community,” Barsema said. Courtney Geiger, director of mission services at Goodwill Industries of Northern Illinois, said the computer system and efforts through One Body, member churches and social services providers means “there’s a lot less running in circles and trying to dig things up.”

Here are a few other things to know about One Body Collaboratives:

Who is getting help
Anyone who lives in Winnebago and Boone counties is eligible to receive goods and services. The majority of the need comes from people who live in Rockford, especially in the 61103 and 61104 ZIP codes, said Mary Cacioppi, executive director. Last year, about 2,000 needs were met, she said. More women were served than men, and nearly as many children as adults were served. Half of the referrals for help came through social service agencies last year. “Primarily those in poverty work with case managers,” Cacioppi said. One Body works with 132 agencies.

Those who receive items and services can be identified in the system to better coordinate services and offerings. Cacioppi said one woman One Body had worked with initially requested mattresses on a few occasions. Staff with One Body’s Resource Coordination Center learned she had been evicted from her residences and had left mattresses behind. Cacioppi said One Body helped her enroll in an eight-week life skills-conflict resolution class offered by one of the involved churches.

Where the money comes from
One Body’s $200,000 annual budget is mostly funded through its member churches. The nonprofit also gets money from individual donors as well as grants. The agency employs Cacioppi and three part-timers who manage the Resource Coordination Center to match needs and resources and to help organize food and clothing donations. Some money is used to pay for items such as toilet paper, which is not able to be purchased by those with food stamps.

For more information
Check with your church to get One Body services or ask an agency caseworker with whom you are involved. To volunteer, email Mary.Cacioppi@OneBodyCollaboratives.org, call her at 815-282-4384, or visit onebodycollaboratives.org.
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