

APP-solutely Necessary

Three apps that are changing the way people access social services

by Katie Linek

In the United States, many now consider having internet access to be a basic need. The Internet is an essential tool for communication, research, and to access a variety of services. The ability to use the Internet is also tied to several fundamental human rights, including freedom of speech, expression, and opinion, and is recognized as a right by law in many countries.

For low-income and homeless families, the Internet can help with finding a home, applying for a job, signing up for classes, or finding homeless shelters and soup kitchens. Therefore, access to the Internet is just as necessary as other programs in helping poor and homeless families get back on their feet. But how can these families use this essential service without the funds to pay for it or a computer to access it?

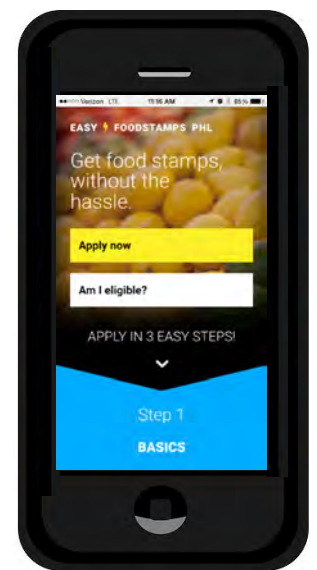
A 2013 Pew research survey showed that 45 percent of users living in households with an annual income of less than \$30,000 mostly use their phone to go online, compared with 27 percent of those living in households with an annual income of \$75,000 or more. Smartphones provide flexibility that computers cannot, while the plethora of public spaces that offer free Wi-Fi make it possible for anyone with a smartphone to access the Internet.

That is why more and more, people are turning to smartphone apps as a way of helping people in need reach necessary services. Here we explore three innovative apps.

Overcoming Hurdles

Blue Ridge Labs, formerly Significance Labs, offers a 12-week fellowship that gives talented individuals the opportunity to create products for communities that are traditionally overlooked by technology and to build products that really make a difference. Out of this fellowship came the creation of Propel, a Brooklyn, NY-based team of mobile developers whose first project is Easy Food Stamps.

“We founded Propel because we wanted to help low-income families overcome the bureaucratic hurdles of getting the benefits they need. Applying for government benefits can be a challenge, involving long office waits, confusing instructions, and busy telephone lines. Low-income families who need help can least afford the hassle of poor user experiences,” says Jimmy Chen, founder and CEO of Propel. “As smartphone technology becomes more and more popular among all Americans regardless of income, we have a unique opportunity to bring essential services to the devices that Americans are already using. That is why we built Easy Food Stamps, a website that makes the food stamp enrollment process simpler, more transparent, and smartphone-friendly.”



Easy Food Stamps is a mobile website created to help people apply for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), better known as food stamps. The website guides applicants through the questionnaire which previously had to be completed on paper or a desktop computer (to which many low-income or homeless families do not have access). The ability to apply online can cut the average application time by up to three hours, which is crucial when it means the difference between taking a day off of work to go to the SNAP office or completing the application at home. The free website can also determine eligibility with the submission of a basic form, prepare users for the in-person SNAP interview, show examples of acceptable documents, and allow users to submit their own documents right from their phone.

SNAP is state-administered, therefore the website currently assists those living in New York State and recently expanded to Philadelphia. In New York, more than 1.76 million people receive food stamps, and another 500,000 are eligible. This website will help them and others access much-needed services with ease. Propel hopes to one day serve all Americans, potentially benefiting 47 million disadvantaged people nationwide.

Help at Your Fingertips

Nutrislice began as an app for schools to share their lunch menus with parents, showcasing the nutritious ingredients used, providing dietary information, and allowing users to flag the food allergies and dietary restrictions of their children. Then Nutrislice Co-founder Michael Craig recognized an important way that they could help children in need.

“Millions of students across Florida depend on a healthy breakfast and lunch during the school year,” says Craig. “These children are still hungry during the summer, and that is where the Summer BreakSpot program helps families.”

The Summer BreakSpot program provides free breakfasts, lunches, and snacks to anyone under the age of 18 all summer long in Florida. The program has sites located at schools, parks, public housing projects, camps, community centers, and churches, as well as uses school buses to transport summer meals to hungry children. Spreading the word about the more than 3,500 locations is where Nutrislice comes in.

“The simple tool allows hungry students to determine the exact location of the nearest summer meal site, along with directions and hours of operation, all right at their fingertips,” explains Craig.

During the summer of 2014, the program served over 13 million meals throughout the state of Florida, which represented a major growth in meals served from the previous summer. This was the result of a focused effort to increase participation, including the addition of Nutrislice.

“Last year, summer meal participation increased by more than 9 percent across the state. That represents an additional 1.2 million nutritious meals served to children 18 and under,” says Craig. “Our research shows that smartphones transcend socioeconomic and cultural differences and can be a powerful

and unifying communications tool. The results in Florida have proven that this research is true.”

Giving Back with an App

Another app that connects people in need with services is DONAFY. Created by Nikki Johnson-Huston, a successful tax attorney in Philadelphia who experienced homelessness as a child, the free app offers three main services: it helps those in need locate nearby services, allowing them to map directions from their location or to search organizations within the app; it allows citizens to locate and donate to nearby nonprofit organizations that serve people in need of housing, food, medical care, mental health counseling, job training, LGBT services, and legal services; and it provides citizens with the opportunity to notify an organization that someone nearby is in need.

“When my family experienced homelessness, there was not a centralized place to get the information that you needed,” says Johnson-Huston. “We would be sent to places that could not help us, whether they served a different population, the hours were wrong, or we needed documents or referrals that no one had told us about. It was really discouraging and sometimes we had used our last dollar to get there.”

Johnson-Huston continues, “I wanted to help the people in need of services as well as people who would like to be *of* service.”

The app is available on the iPhone for free and currently serves those in Philadelphia, but with multiple cities interested in replicating it, Johnson-Huston hopes to expand it nationwide. With no source of income from the app, Johnson-Huston and her husband invested their own money to create it.

“For me, having experienced homelessness, it was important to be a part of trying to come up with the solution,” says Johnson-Huston. “It is about the thousands of people who have some variation of my story. If you invest in us, if you educate us, not only can we be self-sustaining, but we can also lead. We can change our communities. It is not about charity; it is about investment.”

The app also promotes the concept of micro-philanthropy—“the idea that if everyone does just a little bit, we can have a big impact.” ■

