Episode 2 - Learn About the Finding Your Way in PA App Transcript

Melissa:

Hello and welcome to our new podcast, "I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope." I am one of your hosts. Melissa Turnpaugh, Youth Development Coordinator with The Center for Schools and Communities. Our new podcast will amplify the voices and stories of students experiencing homelessness across Pennsylvania and beyond.

Matt:

And I am your co-host, Matt Butensky, Project Manager with The Center for Schools and Communities. We are very excited that you are joining us for this episode of, "I Will Be Your Voice" podcast. On today's episode, we are speaking with Prithvraj Lankar from Shelter App. Prithvraj or Raj has also been working closely with Pennsylvania on the development of the new Finding Your Way in PA App. The new app is a project of Pennsylvania's American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth program. Raj Lankar is a highly skilled developer who has made significant contributions to the field of homelessness resources and we want to just thank Raj for being here today and we are now thrilled to introduce Raj to the podcast. Welcome Raj.

Prithvraj Lankar:

Hey Melissa and Matt, thanks for inviting me to the podcast.

Matt:

Thank you for being here. And before we get started, we wanted to note that it is actually Melissa's birthday today and she is spending her birthday recording our podcast. So happy birthday Melissa. Well again, Melissa, happy birthday and let's get started.

Melissa:

Awesome. Thanks for being with us Raj. So can you tell us a little bit about Shelter App and the work that Shelter app has accomplished for unhoused individuals?

Prithvraj Lankar:

Sure. Shelter App is an all volunteered nonprofit and our mission is to help connect them housed and low-income families to resources that are close to them. Shelter App mainly has resources in few west coast cities and we are planning on expanding our database to other

cities across US. I have been volunteering with Shelter App since the beginning. We have an awesome team of volunteers who have helped us get to where we are currently. Over the years we have worked with different city and state entities to deploy our air app based on their community needs and we are glad to be part of developing the Finding Your Way in P-A app to help the unhoused communities in the state of Pennsylvania.

Matt:

Yeah, that's really cool Raj. And I guess just for some history for our listeners, our State Coordinator Storm Camara for Pennsylvania's ECYEH program or E-C-Y-E-H program was looking for new ways to share resources and services in Pennsylvania for students experiencing homelessness and we wanted to pursue developing a new app for Pennsylvania and that brought us to Shelter App and our work with you.

But we did want to ask a little more about the origin of the app as far as why an app is such a good tool when helping the unhoused community find resources and services. There are different ways to access information and an app might not be the first thing to come to mind when we are thinking of linking the unhoused community with services. So why is an app an effective tool to assist those experiencing homelessness fine services?

Prithvraj Lankar:

So the idea for Shelter App started around eight years ago. I used to work in downtown Denver where there used to be significant unhoused population. One interesting thing I noticed during that time is some of them have been carrying cell phones with them. So I researched on this and found that more than 50 percentage of the homeless and runaway youth carry some kind of smartphones with them.

These research articles were published prior to 2016 and I'm pretty sure those numbers will be really high now. Anyhow, these research articles gave me an opportunity to help because I'm already working in technology field. So in 2016, me and few other volunteers started working on building Shelter App by getting feedback from unhoused users in downtown Denver and also from our local C-O-C continuum of care. After thorough testing we released the initial version of Shelter App in 2018.

That Shelter App is available on both web and mobile app platforms so that it is accessible for everyone. We have seen web version being used at libraries by unhoused users who don't have a phone. Most of our unhoused users who have a phone have been using the Android phones because lots of users had Obama phones which have Android software on them. The Apple App store version is mostly used by service providers. So we have close to 250,000 downloads on all versions of Shelter App and those download numbers itself proves that it can be an effective tool to help people experiencing homelessness.

Matt:

Thanks Raj for sharing that. I appreciate you sharing that research with us because I think that was an early misconception when we were exploring expanding use of an app here in Pennsylvania that the unhoused community doesn't have a phone and we found and you shared with us as well, that is a misconception and that is something that community maintains with them. So with that we want to turn and talk more about Pennsylvania's new app, Finding

Your Way in PA and your work with developing that app with us for our projects. So can you tell us more about the Finding Your Way App and what services users can locate in the app and then also share with us some of the app's features?

Prithvraj Lankar:

Sure. Finding Your Way in PA App has more than 5,000 resources across Pennsylvania. Users can find food pantries, meals, domestic violence shelters, emergency shelters, transitional housing, mental health services, clothing resources, libraries, schools and colleges that are close to them.

There are a lot of features that sets the Finding your way in PA App distinct from other apps. We have a chatbot feature in the app to help users find resources quickly and easily. We have English to Spanish translation feature that also helps the app accessible to Spanish-speaking users.

The web version of the app shows transit directions from their location to the service where they're like to go. The app also has a correct feature where service providers who have claimed their service can receive feedback from users directly. Also, one of the main feedbacks we received during development of the app is that the users wanted to search for the resources anonymously so the users of Finding Your Way in PA App can access the services without signing up or logging it into the app. Those are some of the main features of Finding Your Way in PA App that I can think of my head.

Matt:

Very cool. Yes, I think that's so important that users can find what they're looking for anonymously. You also shared about our chatbot to help direct users to what resources they can find locally. And another fun fact is our chatbot's name is Ayomide, which means helping to find your path and that name was actually selected by our state coordinator for the ECYEH program as well. And we think it's a really fitting name for users who are looking to find services using Finding Your Way. For our listeners, Raj, can you remind us of the five main service categories in the Finding Your Way App and how did you determine those to be important categories for Shelter App, but also for the Finding Your Way App here in Pennsylvania?

Prithvraj Lankar:

That's a great question, Matt. So if you look in the app on Finding Your Way in PA App there you can see five main tabs at the bottom, food, shelter, health resources, and education. So we came up with those five tabs because the mobile app doesn't have that much space. Initially we designed the app for mobile users and if you look at the mobile phone, they don't need that much space for adding all different kinds of categories.

So we had to get it down to a few and we found out when we did some user testing with unhoused users and asked them what are the categories which you frequently visit or which you frequently use. And most of them said they wanted, they're looking for the restrooms because downtown Denver it was hard to get to a restroom and that comes under resources category and some of them said they're looking for emergency shelters, some said they wanted to, they're looking for food.

A few of them said they were looking for substance abuse help. So because of all of those things, we came up with food, which has food pantries and meals, shelter, which has emergency shelters, transitional housing, substance abuse, treatment centers under health. You can find out medical services, mental health resources under resources. You can find clothing resources, you can find general assistance, rent assistance, you can find legal assistance where you can find chargers and you can find restrooms and all of that.

And we added in the education tab at the end where users can find schools, libraries, schools where they can find a contact for the homeless liaisons and library like colleges, educational institutes, so that it would help the users specifically for Finding Your Way in PA App.

Matt:

Right, exactly. And to your earlier point regarding selecting those five service categories, when you're looking at the screen of your phone, you can only fit so much information when you're looking at that small screen. So I understand you wanted to narrow those service categories into kind of buckets so that it was more searchable and usable and people could find what they're looking for. So that's cool insight.

And then as you had said, unique to Pennsylvania in the Finding Your Way App is the education service category. So that, as you had mentioned, homeless liaisons that are located at school districts and local education agencies throughout pa, they're listed in the app being that this app is connected to our State Department of Education products for our E C Y E H program. So that was really important to us here in Pennsylvania with the development of the Finding your Way in PA App. So thanks for sharing that insight.

Melissa:

So Raj, you explained that the app has more than 5,000 resources, which is great for our users that are accessing the app on any platform. So you talked about different unique features as well, but specifically around those 5,000 resources, you kind of hinted on how service providers can claim and manage their service. Can you give us some more details regarding that, how they can do that and what the responsibilities entail?

Prithvraj Lankar:

Sure. So service providers can register in the app to add services or to update the existing services. If their service is already listed, they can click on claim services so that we can assign the service to them. One of the main advantages for service providers to register the app is that they will be able to get direct feedback from end users. So I request all those service providers listening to this podcast to sign up and claim their services if it already exists or else add your services on the app so that the users can find real time information about the services.

Melissa:

Yeah, thanks for encouraging our listeners to become managed users because it is important the more managed users we have, the more effective the app can be because we'll have information updated and filled incorrectly. So you've been able to explain some of the features

now you've explained our service providers responsibilities with claiming and managing their services. Do you have any stories you can share with us about the success with our listeners?

Prithvraj Lankar:

Yeah, sure. We heard a lot of success stories from both service providers and end users. Service providers were able to help a lot of users based on the user space because they were able to get connected with the end users directly through that feedback part. Lots of unhoused users emailed us that the app was really helpful for them to get connected to the resources they have been looking for. Since the release of Finding Your Way in PA App, it has been downloaded and used by around 6,500 users. So as I said earlier, I request everyone listening with a podcast to download the app so that they can show the nearest resources to people who are looking for help.

Matt:

That's really great. And with that we want to share that we have a new resource available for our service providers so that we can continuously have more users. We want to go much higher than 6,000 users in Pennsylvania and we have created a new community outreach toolkit to support service providers in sharing availability of the new app. And the toolkit has printable resources, flyers, and other ways to raise awareness about the Finding Your way in PA App. So with that message, we are closing our episode of, "I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope." Thank you Raj for being with us today as our guest. That was a very informative discussion on how we can better serve the homeless community in Pennsylvania with our new app Finding Your Way in PA. So thanks for being here.

Prithvraj Lankar:

Thank you both and happy birthday, Melissa again.

Matt:

Yes, thank you. Yes. Happy birthday, Melissa. All right. So to learn more about the Finding Your Way in PA App, please visit finding your way in pa.app/login. Thank you for listening to, "I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope." We hope you enjoyed the episode. Please check back and tune in for more.