BigBurgh.com App
Helps Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

BY THE NUMBERS

- BigBurgh attracted 53,000 site visits during its first year of operation.
- More than 2,000 individuals have been trained on the use of BigBurgh.com.
- 50+ training sessions have provided feedback.
- BigBurgh features 170 free services from 80 providers in the City of Pittsburgh.
- 60+ centers (clinics, libraries, churches, food banks, etc.) share promotional materials.
- Independent audit reported 91% of queries returned at least one service listing and 100% of listings were relevant to information requested.
- 60% of homeless youth have smartphones.

“IS THERE AN APP FOR THAT?”

Since Allegheny County set the ambitious goal to make homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring by 2022, numerous stakeholders are collaborating to address this pressing issue.

Beginning in 2013, many working in the field requested technological assistance in response to the ongoing challenge of accessing up-to-date information by both homeless individuals and service providers. During numerous conversations among service providers and leaders, one simple question repeatedly surfaced. “Is there an app for that?” referred to an obvious need to alter the system of connecting people (especially youth experiencing homelessness) with available services and agencies in a position to help them.

Those six words – “Is there an app for that?” – set in motion a collaboration that has created a highly successful model worthy of replication throughout the nation.

THERE IS NOW!

BigBurgh.com is a mobile-optimized website that is completely free and accessible without the need for any login or app store account. View it on any smartphone, tablet, laptop or desktop computer with a data plan or Internet connectivity. Currently, BigBurgh includes more than 170 free services available from 80 different providers within the City of Pittsburgh.
“We have the resources to get people exactly what they need quickly. That makes our relationship with the homeless much stronger and eases the tensions that can arise when a uniformed officer interacts with a member of a vulnerable population.”

Assistant Chief Anna Kudraw, Pittsburgh Bureau of Police

About BigBurgh.com

Dr. Joseph Lagana, a respected community connector and networker, discussed the question with Bob Firth, President of Informing Design. The foundation of BigBurgh’s design would provide answers to immediate issues that arise on the street with the touch of a fingertip, immediately eliminating the experience of wading through long lists of primarily irrelevant search results.

At the conclusion of the research phase, the Informing Design team reported a resounding, “Yes, there can be an app for that,” and, with the help of 10 local funding sources, the BigBurgh.com pilot project was born.

BigBurgh.com is a mobile-optimized website – completely free and accessible without the need for any login or app store account – that can be viewed on any smartphone, tablet, laptop or desktop computer with a data plan or Internet connectivity. It is an invaluable resource for police, teachers, clergy, medical and social services professionals, parents and ordinary citizens alike. Most importantly, it’s for the homeless themselves – more than 60% of homeless youth have smartphones, and homeless adults frequently access computers at libraries and other centers.

BigBurgh opens with a “For You” dial that enables the user to pre-filter results based on his or her gender (including transgender), age, and veteran or family with young children status. The categories themselves parse out the most important everyday human needs for the homeless: shelter (both during the day and overnight), meals, clinics (further broken down into type of health need), showers and laundry, clothing and diapers, food pantries, transportation, and expert help with financial, legal and employment matters. Results then appear in order of distance from the user.

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How it all began...

2013
Question first voiced: “IS THERE AN APP FOR THAT?”

2015
- Informing Design begins research
- Bob Firth develops specs, functionality and data model
- First police focus group assembled

2016
- Informing Design work is funded and project begins
DOWNLOAD AND NAVIGATE THE FREE APP

To download the app to an iPhone, Android or desktop, simply type in “bigburgh.com” in the browser.

For You: Customize the results . . . or go straight to All Services

NOTE: It is not an app that is sold in the app store.

Every day, I find out there’s another kid who has used the app and was able to get the resources that they needed.”

Debra Smallwood, parent volunteer and organizer, Brashear High School

“T”imes are tough, but this app truly treats us with dignity and respect.”

Beta tester visiting 412 Youth Zone

- First Steering Committee meeting takes place
- First youth focus group assembled
- Second police focus group takes place
- Beta released (May 1)
- Social Service Liaison begins working on project
- Public launch on August 29 features press conference with Mayor Peduto, County Executive Fitzgerald and Congressman Doyle
Financials

Due to the length of time required to develop, test and launch the app, organizers sought financial support from foundations for a two-year period. The Homeless Children’s Education Fund provides project management and serves as fiscal agent. Expenses to date are approximately $130,000. Generous in-kind donations from numerous individuals and organizations supported the effort from its inception, including an in-kind donation from designer Bob Firth who did not charge for time invested, which is estimated to be 1,000 hours.

FOUNDATION SUPPORT
Ayres Family Foundation
Birmingham Foundation
Buncher Foundation
Heinz Endowments
Highmark Health Foundation
Margaret Ritchie R. Battle Fund
McCarten Foundation
Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation
Pittsburgh Foundation
Serafini Foundation (and Terry Serafini)

“I instead of leaving the young people to their own volition to solve their problems, now they can actually use that mobile app to get the services they need rather than simply relying on each other.”

Joseph Lagana, Founder, Homeless Children’s Education Fund

Moving Forward

2017
- Spanish translation introduced
- Many new app functions added including empty bed alert
- Expansion to Mon Valley
- Outreach forum with police takes place

Upcoming
- Training for Pittsburgh Council on Higher Education police, Crisis Intervention Team police, City EMS/Fire and Downtown Ministerium
- Spin-off initiatives to create similar apps for opioid addition, incarceration and mental health crisis