

Better Together

Renewing Benevolence through Church & Community Collaborations



In 2014 Americans gave over \$358 billion to support philanthropic work and 32% of those charitable dollars went to religious institutions.¹ The billions of offering dollars supported a variety of church budgetary needs, such as staff salaries, facility upkeep, and ministry programs. Historically, places of worship also set aside a portion of their budgets to meet the needs of people in their local communities. Churches in both rural and urban environments field requests, sometimes daily, for financial assistance, whether it be to help a family pay a utility bill or fill a tank with gas.

Churches typically maintain a certain level of available funds, often called benevolence funds, to help someone in need or crisis. Benevolence funds can be anywhere from 3-20% of a local church's budget which translates into billions of dollars annually across America.

While one church can help one family at a time, faith leaders are coming together to better steward those offerings and strengthen their capacity to meet needs. Through communication and coordination, churches are reducing duplication of services and taking proactive approaches to fighting poverty. They are moving away from individual congregations providing temporary relief to coalitions and cooperative ministries that create sustainable, restorative solutions for families.

This report looks at the history and highlights of three such collaborative efforts, initiated by church leaders. Each collaboration has varying originations and operational styles as well as several common denominators. One of the commonalities shared by the ministries in this report is their use of CharityTracker, a case management system to communicate, track and report data and often share in case management.

¹ <http://www.nptrust.org/philanthropic-resources/charitable-giving-statistics>

A Common Denominator

One thing shared by the ministries profiled in this report is their use of CharityTracker, a shared case management system to communicate, track data and share case management.

In 2006, a group of Florence, AL community leaders and developers created CharityTracker while worked together for Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. Since those humble beginnings, CharityTracker has grown to serve in over 1,000 communities across the USA.



www.charitytracker.net

Stillwater CARES

Location:

Stillwater, Oklahoma with population of approximately 80,000 in surrounding area

Website:

www.stillwaterCARES.org

Leadership:

Led by Board of Directors, Advisory Council & Executive Director
Founding Executive Director, Quinn Schipper
Current Executive Director, Stephanie Fry

Organizational Size:

58 Churches & Organizations

Current Key Offerings to Community:

Administrates CharityTracker Network

Provides comprehensive community service directory

Provides Getting Ahead instructor support & courses

Stillwater CARES is not a direct service provider, rather they build the capacity of local churches & organizations

Key Learnings:

Relationships are the key to preventing & alleviating poverty

Started with pastors praying & building trusting relationships

Pastors went beyond themselves to include community leaders in solutions

Community learned together, collaboratively implementing language & practices of resources such as *When Helping Hurts* & *Bridges Out of Poverty*

Having a shared case management system provides better communication across churches and agencies, reduces duplication of services, measures collective impact, and informs of service gaps

Stillwater CARES, Inc.

Coming Together for Community Transformation

"Stillwater CARES actually started from a prayer network—getting pastors together to pray for one another, for each other's churches and for the community. The first few weeks everyone was wondering if we wanted to be there; but very quickly, trust was established as relationships were formed," says Quinn Schipper, founder of Stillwater CARES.

The pastors, ministers and reverends in the room realized that they had several things in common. One of those things was what they wanted to do in the community. After years of praying with and for one another, deeper conversations emerged in 2008. Schipper explained, "One pastor was insistent that we talk about people who go from church to church and agency to agency for handouts but never get the proverbial 'hand up' that brings transformation into their lives." While the goal of their meeting was always prayer first, time was added to the agenda for this discussion about benevolence. Those discussions went on for several weeks and a series of values emerged with the pastors asking one another: **How can we do benevolence differently? How do we assist people in ways that are more relational, responsible, respectful, and redemptive?**



View our free webinar
with Quinn Schipper

Faith Collaboratives for
the Common Good

Available now at:

<https://vimeo.com/album/4529628/video/212814281>

Expanding to a Community Conversation

To find answers to some of their questions, the pastors widened the conversation to include community-based solutions. "We invited social services and others into the discussion and from that sprang an ad hoc benevolence initiative with a dozen of us including pastors, businessmen, social service agency representatives and the Salvation Army," recalled Schipper. Among other things, the team leading the benevolence initiative did a survey of how local churches administer benevolence assistance.

This eventuated in a feasibility study in 2010 to understand the broader community view of benevolence. Interviews included the United Way director, civic leaders, educators, and other sector representatives. Community leaders reported seeing duplication of services, abuses of the system by clients, and issues that remained unresolved. "As we were driving towards the completion of the study, we discovered that literally every single person—100% of those interviewed—said there was a need for coordination of the services. The number two thing that came out of the study was that there was a need for some kind of system—a technology piece—that would help manage the coordination," said Schipper. In short, it was time for the churches and the community to work together more effectively.

Forming a Different Kind of 501(c)(3) to Coordinate & Communicate

With a strong base of nonprofits, churches and agencies already serving the community, the last thing anyone on the team wanted to do was form yet another organization, at least not the typical service-providing agency or ministry. Schipper explained, "Long story short, the outcome of the feasibility study was that a new 501(c)(3) would be formed with a goal to help coordinate service providers and second, find a system to help do that. We all agreed that this new organization would NOT do direct services—that was fundamental." Schipper was chosen to spearhead the efforts as Executive Director, recruiting and orienting the new board. While Stillwater CARES, Inc. formally opened its door in January 2011, informally, the network had been building relationships, growing trust, and developing a vision since that first pastors' prayer gathering years prior.

According to Schipper, in 2013, Stillwater CARES formalized an association among 30 churches and 28 organizations and service agencies via a Memorandum of Understanding. The association members (called associates) made agreements to work together to:

- Practice goodwill and mutual support of one another
- Promote best practices to prevent and alleviate poverty
- Provide a mechanism for collaborative case management

"Our emerging network became an association to shape true collaboration to achieve collective impact!" said Schipper.

Implementing a Shared Case Management System

Stillwater CARES leadership initially thought that they would have to create their ideal shared technology system from scratch, but Schipper believes that providential circumstances introduced their association to CharityTracker as well as funded it. "Our director of public safety was a driving force for a data system. He came onto the board adamant that it needed to be a priority. Honestly, it was a hard sell at first to the community, agencies and churches," said Schipper.

Stillwater CARES hosted a "brain trust" where they asked for honest feedback on their organization's next steps and implementation of the CharityTracker system. "We literally told people to leave their purses and wallets in the car because we just wanted to pick their brains, not their pockets. The director of public safety got up and spoke about CharityTracker, asking for feedback," explained Schipper.

CharityTracker would provide agencies and churches with the following:

- technology to communicate with one another in real-time through bulletins and alerts
- ability to create a services directory with referrals
- ability to run collective and individual agency reports of outputs and outcomes
- a mechanism to record benevolence and assistance records and share them

The brain trust meeting provided more than feedback. Leaders left the meeting passionate to see collaborative solutions. Within a week's time, CharityTracker was more than fully funded. "God brought the right people in that room. Having the funding was the tipping point," said Schipper. Stillwater CARES launched CharityTracker in September 2014 with 40 agencies. "Our original goal was to launch with 24!" said Schipper. To date, 48 of the 58 associates of Stillwater CARES use CharityTracker for their database solution.

Responsible & Responsive Benevolence

How did implementing a shared case management system like CharityTracker, help with being responsible and responsive, as the pastors originally had explored? By communicating, agencies and churches in the Stillwater CARES association have been able to reduce the duplication of services. Through sharing case management, they get a better picture of who is asking for and receiving assistance regularly and why. Through collective reporting, they can also see where gaps and overlaps in services may exist.

In August 2015, after a full year of data entry, a meeting of the associates was held to present collective data that better informed them of the face of poverty in their community. "One outcome of initiating CharityTracker was that it helped us see and address food insecurity in our community. Stillwater CARES took a very proactive role in helping shape common practices among the existing five church-based food pantries as well as starting a separate nonprofit, Our Daily Bread Food & Resource Center, which connects under-resourced people not only to food but also to other resources to help them get ahead," reported Schipper.

Relational, Respectful, and Redemptive Benevolence

In addition to implementing CharityTracker, churches and agencies in Stillwater are changing the language of poverty in their community. Pastors and leaders engaged in a 10-week discussion of the book *When Helping Hurts* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. "This was a real game-changer for us. *When Helping Hurts* gave us a common language. For example, we are here to restore and develop, not just provide for crisis and relief. We talk very intentionally about preventing, not just alleviating, poverty. Language is very powerful," explained Schipper. Pastors and leaders in the community use this language, which flows into their congregations and community volunteers.

Stillwater CARES has also played a critical role in bringing the Getting Ahead course to their community and across the state. Getting Ahead is a 20-week course for people who want to move beyond their circumstances. The class puts the popular principles and research of Dr. Rudy Payne's book, *Bridges Out of Poverty*, into practice. Over 100 people in the community attended a workshop introducing the *Bridges Out of Poverty* concepts and from that, 16 leaders have been trained to run the Getting Ahead course, including Schipper and his wife, Becky.

According to Schipper, there is nothing about Getting Ahead that is easy to get people to participate in; it requires a high level of commitment, spending three hours a week over 20 weeks to complete the course. "Our first pilot class



The pilot Getting Ahead class, discovering hope and restoration in their finances and more.

successfully graduated every person but one, who had very legitimate reasons for needing to drop the course. In training for the class, we were told that two to four people drop out in the first month. Not only did we graduate all but one, over 60% of the group had perfect attendance," said Schipper.

The stories from the class show that people can be elevated above and beyond their circumstances of poverty—no matter what that poverty is, whether that be financial, relational, emotional or spiritual. Getting Ahead graduate Trisha Travis shared, "Money is not the answer to poverty. It is never the answer. The answer is hope."

April Taylor, another class graduate, shared, "Believing in yourself is difficult when you are brought up in poverty. My husband and I were both working hard but still on government assistance and still struggling. We really needed someone to pull out the map and show us the way. In the class, it didn't feel like they were saying 'you made bad choices and this is why'. It really left like people believed in me and I could rise above the poverty cycle."

"You can get ahead and build resources for a better life and it is all about relationships," shared Schipper. The long-term goal is for a number of churches and community organizations to host Getting Ahead classes with church members or volunteers coming alongside participants as supportive mentors.

Schipper shared, "Quite often benevolence hasn't been done in ways that are respectful because people are not always understood. One of the catch phrases in my life and ministry is that relationships are everything. They are messy in the best of times and when you throw in the complexity of poverty, generational issues, and sometimes mental health issues, relationships get really messy. We realized that unless assistance is relationship-based, we were a part of a system that was perpetuating brokenness. As pastors our greatest desire was to connect how Christ's redemption story is part of the redemption of families."

Interfaith Ministries, Inc.

Location:

Wichita Falls, TX, serving a community of approximately 110,000 people

Website:

www.interfaithwf.org

Leadership:

Led by Board of Directors, three staff members & hundreds of volunteers

Organizational Size:

Partnership of 70+ area Churches

Plus 36 Active Agencies as part of Wichita Falls Interagency Network

Current Key Offerings to Community:

Disaster Recovery Services

Prescription Assistance

Food Pantry

Community Interpreting & Translating Assistance

Administrator of Wichita Falls Interagency Network

Key Learnings:

Disaster can bring churches together

Combined resources yield greater impact and more volunteers

When starting a new endeavor, go with the willing
You don't have to wait for full consensus

Shared case management reduces duplication of services

Shared case management can improve client progress

On-going collaboration aids disaster preparedness

Interfaith Ministries, Inc.

Responding to Disaster Together

On April 10, 1979, an enormous tornado devastated Wichita Falls, flattening a huge portion of the town. With hundreds of families homeless, area churches and the National Council of Churches banded together to bring hope and healing. Interfaith Disaster Service was created to help families in the rebuilding of homes.

According to Interfaith Ministries history, it was a first for the city and churches as there had been no previous cooperation across denominational and faith lines.

In October 1981 when rebuilding was complete, those serving shoulder to shoulder decided to keep the cooperative spirit alive. Twenty-five churches pledged to support the creation of Interfaith Ministries, Inc. (IMI) with the purpose of having a central location whereby people could receive assistance. This would eliminate families having to go church to church for different assistance, allow congregations to pool their resources for greater impact, and reduce the duplication of services.



Today, almost 35 years later, Director of Services, Byron Francois said, "We have become the hub of help and we deal with the bulk of assistance in the area. We offer assistance with utility bills, mortgages, medicine and have a food pantry averaging 4,000 pounds a month—all with three staff members. We rock and roll!" And the number of supporting and involved churches has grown to over 70.

Combining Resources for Impact

Partner churches of IMI provide the bulk of financial and food donations for IMI. "In our history, we have not received any state or government funding and it will continue to be that way. We do good work and try to be good stewards of what we have. We are respected in the community and well funded. We take that to mean we are doing the right thing and God blesses us for that," said Francois. Churches of all denominations and sizes are a part of IMI's network of good. Francois continued, "Churches who give us \$2 or \$3 a month matter just as much to us as those who can give \$10,000."

The churches do more than support IMI financially; they provide many of the volunteers who help with everything from interviewing families needing assistance to food distribution and even language translation. In 2014 they had 97 volunteers who contributed almost 8,000 hours of time.

According to Francois, nearly all of the benevolence requests that are made to churches get funneled through to IMI. "In this community, clients can go to the churches (for assistance), but they are most often going to

refer them right to us because they partner with us to do this work," he said. According to Francois, this allows the churches to focus on growing their ministries. It also gives clients a wider network of assistance.

Offering a Hand Up

In an effort to better support clients and communicate with churches and other helping organizations, IMI formed the Wichita Falls Interagency Network in December 2012. This network uses the CharityTracker online database to send out bulletins and alerts to one another as well as share client data and run reports. They have 36 active agencies using the system. "What we do in CharityTracker is for the community and the client. By sharing information, we can see the progression of a client, where he or she is going and what they are receiving. This also helps us cut down on duplication of services," said Francois.

If a client comes back a third time, Francois said he can go deeper into conversation with him or her. "I talk about their finances and can refer them to other agencies that can help. For example, Catholic Charities is now on our network and I can refer someone to them for budgeting and I know that Catholic Charities will follow a client for a whole calendar year." Other times, referrals might be made for mental health services or employment assistance. Francois continued, "Nobody is frustrated by the requests of the people who want to get help, but we do want to be good stewards of our resources. We, at Interfaith Ministries don't support entitlement and all of us on staff use our own life experiences to guide us with clients."



Byron Francois, Director of Services at Interfaith Ministries

Prior to having the CharityTracker system, Francois said there were a lot of emails going back and forth between agencies, which was inefficient. "Information now gets out much quicker and neater and goes where it is supposed to go. CharityTracker gave us a way to house all the information and cut down on all the emails, which could get a little long in the tooth!"

Bringing CharityTracker to Wichita Falls

Getting multiple agencies and churches to utilize the same system is no small task. How did IMI implement such a community-wide system? "Well, when agency and church leaders realized we at IMI were going to pay for it, everybody loved it!" joked Francois.

While IMI does fund CharityTracker for their community, the most important principle they applied to starting the network was to start with the willing. They didn't wait to have everyone on board before using the system. "We started our network with just one other church and it was just the two of us for about eight months," said Francois. From that small start and months of a good track record, IMI and the other church were able to show just how easy the system was to use for recording data, running reports and communicating with one another. "Now CharityTracker has caught on like wildfire here. Any new pastor or organization that gets their 501c3 status immediately wants to come on board and be a part of our network," said Francois.

Always Prepared

In 2014, Wichita Falls citizens experience yet another natural disaster; this time a massive flood. With CharityTracker already operational and churches already working together, Francois said, "We were able to communicate well and even allow the United Way to access the system and add 15 users and have their clients become our clients."

Reporting Success and Opportunities

One benefit of using the system to collaborate is the ability to track their collective assistance. "Since we have two different service counties, we can run county reports once a month or quarter. We can track the dollars that have been distributed and even break it down by zip code. We can also separate our data by churches to give us an idea where people are being referred from," explained Francois.

Organizationally, IMI uses CharityTracker to run monthly reports for their board and donors of how many new clients came in and what they received. "Another thing we track is whether or not our clients are attending church anywhere. While it is not an exact science, we have noticed and reported to our churches that we used to see 70% of clients attending church somewhere. Today, that number is more like 50%. So, there are a lot of unchurched people out there."

While IMI doesn't try to evangelize in their agency, they do inform clients that there are multiple churches they could have the opportunity to pick from. Francois said, "We try to introduce them to Christ through our giving and let them know they can definitely find somewhere to park themselves in church on the weekend!"

Mercy's Gate

Location:

Serving neighborhoods in the northern Colorado Springs, CO area

Website:

www.mercysgate.org

Leadership:

Led by Board of Directors, six staff members & hundreds of volunteers

Organizational Size:

Partnership of 70+ area Churches

Current Key Offerings to Community:

Spiritual Assistance

Financial Assistance for Rent, Utilities & Medical needs

Food Pantry

Faith Community Nurse

Vouchers for clothing and transportation assistance

Legal Assistance

Seasonal Programs including Tax Preparation, Annual Health Fair,
Back to School Program, Thanksgiving & Christmas Projects

Key Learnings:

A small collaboration can yield big results over time

Measuring results is valuable and motivating

CharityTracker is available & valuable for single-agency use

Volunteers are the most valuable resource

Mercy's Gate

A Beacon of Hope

Mercy's Gate is an all-encompassing beacon of hope for many families in northern Colorado Springs facing hard times. It began very humbly, however, with just five churches coming together 30 years ago to create a simple food pantry called Northern Churches Care. Over the first few years the ministry had different homes and added programs as needs of neighbors surfaced. Jenny Kay, Director of Community Programs said, "As needs evolved we tried to find a way to meet them."

Today, Mercy's Gate has a bigger mission than supplying food: churches joining together to love their neighbors by helping with physical financial, emotional and spiritual needs. On a weekly basis, member churches, volunteers and staff provide a plethora of resources all while tending to their neighbors' spiritual and emotional health.

Kay said, "We are a faith-based social service agency. We do rental assistance, utility assistance, clothing vouchers, and have an enormous food pantry. We also have a faith community nurse and help with prescription and medical needs. We offer a little professional counseling, connect people to free legal help and make referrals for other services. As a faith-based organization, we offer prayer for people, too." Along with weekly human services, the organizations runs seasonal programs, like offering free tax preparation, an Annual Health Fair, a Back to School Program, and both Thanksgiving & Christmas Projects.



Pat Simmons & Jenny Kay at Mercy's Gate northern Colorado Springs center where they help neighbors in need.

Measuring a Big Impact

According to Pat Simmons, faithful volunteer at Mercy's Gate for over 10 years, there are nearly 100,000 people in the database who have received assistance over the years. And Pat would know, as she is the administrator of Mercy's Gate CharityTracker database. "We have used CharityTracker since the end of 2010," said Pat. Prior to that, she was assisting the staff by entering data into an Access program. "I knew basically what I needed to do to get started. I have put in so many names. It's amazing! The 100,000 includes people of all ages," she continued.

When Mercy's Gate started using CharityTracker, they migrated all their previous data to the new system. Though the organization does not network their database with others agencies or churches in the community (like other's profiled in this report), their single agency use has proved very beneficial to the organization.

Pat, as well as a few other volunteers, help to run reports of the good work for their neighbors. She runs a report for the organization's Executive Director every month on the rental assistance program and another volunteer is currently running reports for a large program audit. All this is information in compiled straight from CharityTracker. The reports tell them vital information. "For instance, we now know that most of the people we serve come in for assistance less than three times in their lifetime, 83%, in fact, have been here three times or less," said Kay.

When local churches receive benevolence requests, especially those outside of their congregants, Kay said the churches refer people to Mercy's Gate. "We can vet their requests and help them with a lot of potential resources. This helps not having people going from church to church getting a little bit of money from different places," said Kay. Mercy's Gate makes a big impact in the neighborhoods they serve. In one year alone, they reported helping in the following ways:

- 580 families received rental assistance, preventing homelessness for 1,580 people
- 865 families received utilities assistance, providing heat, electricity & water for 2,840 people
- 515 individuals received local transportation vouchers
- 1,768 individuals received clothing vouchers
- 5,107 emergency food & commodities packages were distributed to the hungry
- 1,079 individuals received legal, budget or mental health counseling
- 1,494 children and adults attended the annual Health Fair
- 2,258 tax returns prepared for low income households, returning over \$1.4M in tax refunds
- 399 families received Thanksgiving baskets
- 128 households displaced by the Black Forest Fire assisted during this community-wide crisis
- 1,286 medical services were given through our Neighborhood Nurse Center
- The Heart Training Center provided 9,000 services in life skills, teaching, training and prayer

The Most Valuable Resource

Though having CharityTracker is valuable to Mercy's Gate, the organization's most valuable asset are its volunteers, like Pat, who turned 75 this year. She says finding the opportunity to serve at Mercy's Gate was a "God call." Pat shared, "We moved out here 11 years ago. I was looking to get involved in something and was reading the paper. They were having a Thanksgiving basket program and I responded to helping fill the baskets. I felt that God brought this to my attention and I am still here! Knowing that I am helping the staff in the background is important to me."

One of her most memorable experiences was as a hostess, serving a neighbor obviously is a bit of distress while waiting to receive assistance. "I don't know what her condition was, but I remember she could not sit in the waiting room. She was standing in the hallway and I went to her and asked her to keep the passageway open. She told me, 'I just can't go in there.' I gave her a hug and asked her where she would be more comfortable, then I took a chair outside for her. She was so appreciative. I'll never forget that. I just love being here at Mercy's Gate because it is a wonderful place with a lot of good help offered and good people serving."

Additional Resources:

Getting Ahead & CharityTracker Working Together

Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World is a book and a 45-hour workshop that helps individuals in poverty build their resources for a more prosperous life for themselves, their families, and their communities. The Getting Ahead curriculum involves rigorous work done in a safe learning environment with the support of an experienced facilitator and co-facilitator. Participants are called "investigators," to *examine* their own experience of poverty as well as explore issues in the community that impact poverty – banking, housing, jobs, transportation – providing critical information the community can use to take action to end poverty. The curriculum and facilitators guide investigators through an assessment of their own resources and how to build those resources as part of their move to self-sufficiency. Getting Ahead strives to put tools and relationships in the hands of people in poverty to make a difference in their own lives and in the life of their community.

Getting Ahead, Stillwater CARES, Inc. and CharityTracker have partnered to create assessments and measurements for tracking class participant success. Learn more about bringing Getting Ahead to your community at <http://www.ahaprocess.com/>. Watch the Getting Ahead & CharityTracker introduction video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hq7nN8DNBC0>

Helping Without Hurting

When Helping Hurts, written by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, exposes the efforts that churches have engaged in which unintentionally undermine the people they are trying to help. Its central point is to provide proven strategies that challenge Christians to help the poor empower themselves. This book points out that sustainable change for people living in poverty comes not from the outside-in, but from the inside-out.

Helping Without Hurting in Church Benevolence applies the principles of *When Helping Hurts*, serving as a practical guidebook for church staff, deacons, or volunteers who work with low-income people. With stories, forms, and online tools for your church to use, *Helping Without Hurting in Church Benevolence* equips you to walk alongside the materially poor in humble relationships.

Learn more about these resources and events at www.chalmers.org.