

Collaboration Technologies for Organizations Serving the Homeless (CTOSH)

Co-Directors: Professors Craig Scott and Laurie Lewis

Tech Support and Training: Scott D'Urso

Communication Studies Department,

University of Texas at Austin

The Project in Brief

The CTOSH project represents an innovative collaboration between academia and local health and human service organizations, specifically the Department of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin and approximately 30 organizations who serve persons in homeless situations in Austin. The purpose of the Collaboration Technologies for Organizations Serving the Homeless (CTOSH) project is to enable local organizations that serve the homeless to enhance their ability to work cooperatively in order to maximize a rapidly dwindling supply of financial and other resources. In order to do so CTOSH would provide these organizations with advanced tools for communication. These tools will enable them to interact in more timely and efficient ways, make decisions that include input from all knowledgeable and interested parties, collaborate in the preparation of important documentation and appeals for funding, "meet" virtually when face-to-face meetings are difficult or impossible, and enhance the overall quality of the coordinated services they offer to their clients. In order to achieve these goals, we must equip each of these organizations with the appropriate infrastructure (e.g., high speed Internet connections, powerful desktop computers, desktop video cameras, collaborative software) and provide the necessary personnel for training and ongoing technical support. We plan to provide instant messaging, voice chat, video-conferencing, and file sharing and a sophisticated web-based group decision support system (e.g., *Facilitate.com*) for electronic meetings. Assessment of the pre- and post- goal achievement will be conducted and recommendations made regarding enhanced use of the tools and expansion of the project at one year.

Background on the Network of Homeless Services Provider

The average daily estimate of homeless persons in Austin/Travis County is 3,977 persons. The fastest growing population of homeless are families (43 percent of homeless population in Travis County on any given day). An estimated 23% of the homeless population in this county are children in homeless families. Additionally, unaccompanied youth account for 7 percent of the total population. The individual work of these organizations includes addressing needs of specialized populations (e.g., helping homeless kids stay in school; helping homeless families navigate the system to secure affordable housing and achieve job training; counseling homeless victims of domestic violence and protect them from threatening behavior of abusers; assisting abandoned and abused teens to redirect their lives and complete GED; helping mentally ill homeless persons to gain access to appropriate health care; providing safe and appropriate shelter and transitional housing for those who are seeking to recover from crisis and obtain permanent affordable housing; providing the most basic of life's needs including showers, laundry, lockers, phone access, food, clothes, diapers, dental care)

Needs for Collaboration within this Network

They come together through the Homeless Task Force, a planning group of The Community Action Network (CAN), to share information, assess and prioritize needs in the homeless community, cooperatively develop funding sources, and engage in creative problem solving and program support.

The CAN's Homeless Task Force has been in existence since 1995 and has been instrumental in coordinating a vast number of programs and projects within this community. The CAN is a broad-based community forum involving individuals and organizations from every walk of our community (e.g., Austin Independent School District, Austin Area Human Services Association, Capital Metro, Community Justice Council, Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, United Way, Workforce Board, City of Austin and the Austin Area Research Organization). Its' goals include providing accurate and timely information for the community to use in prioritizing needs, mobilizing the community resources and addressing a variety of issue areas (e.g., early education, workforce development, wellness, homelessness, public safety).

The service providers in the homeless network have substantial needs for communication, coordination, and collaboration with one another to provide services to their targeted communities, to avoid unnecessary duplication of services, to discourage unproductive competition for vital and scarce resources and to creatively plan to end homelessness in the Austin / Travis County area. Collaborative efforts are likely to be increasingly key in filling in the current gaps in the "Continuum of Care" that moves homeless persons through a series of

steps from crisis to eventual stability and self-sufficiency. Steps in that continuum include intake and crisis intervention, access to health care and other basic needs, obtaining education and/or job training, sheltering, transitional housing and finally obtaining permanent affordable housing.

Despite the importance of interaction among the organizations, many of these organizations even lack basic tools for communication. Most have limited access to computers, voice mail, and reliable Internet connections. Few have training or access to modern software that enables collaborative interaction enhanced by technologies. Therefore, their collaborative efforts have been limited to what can be accomplished through face-to-face meetings, phone "tag," and trading paper documents through the mail. The result of these deficits has been slower response to urgent problems, less effective decision-making regarding prioritization of goals and missions, reduced effectiveness in service coordination, and weaker proposals for funding, among other problems.

Description of Proposed Program:

The goal of CTOSH is to provide these organizations with tools for advanced communication. These tools will enable them to interact in more timely and efficient ways, make decisions that include input from all knowledgeable and interested parties, collaborate in the preparation of important documentation and appeals for funding, "meet" virtually when face-to-face meetings are difficult or impossible, and enhance the overall quality of the coordinated services they offer to their clients. In order to achieve these goals, we must equip each of these organization with the appropriate infrastructure (i.e. high speed Internet connections, powerful desktop computers, desktop video cameras, etc.) and provide the necessary personnel for training and ongoing technical support. We plan to provide instant messaging, voice chat, video-conferencing, file sharing, and a sophisticated web-based group decision support system (e.g., *Facilitate.com*) for electronic meetings.

Over the course of the funding year, we envision a three-step process in this project. In the first stage (Spring 2002), each member organization is being assessed as to its specific communication technology needs and the whole network is being surveyed to determine current levels and types of communicative interaction that are taking place. Interviews with most of the provider organizations and detailed questionnaire data are being gathered. This data will be used, in part, as a baseline to compare with changes in communication and outcomes that takes place after implementation of the technologies. In the second stage (Summer 2002), the hardware and software will be installed and we will train the members of the organizations on the technical operation and the communication dynamics related to use of these

new technologies. Ongoing support will be offered to these organizations as they adjust to the new tools. In the third stage of the project (Fall /Winter 2002), we will assess the benefits of the new tools for each of the organizations and the network at large and then make recommendations to the Homeless Task Force about expansion of the technology.

Specific outcomes of the project will be (1) an increase in the speed and quality of decision-making of this group of organizations, (2) increase in the flexibility of the communication alternatives for representatives of these organizations, (3) improved access of all organizational representatives to decision-making concerning important issues, (4) increase in collaborative activity among these organizations in terms of funding proposals, program creation, service modification and improvement and other mission-focused activities, and (5) reduction of the digital divide that currently separates so many nonprofit organizations from their for-profit counterparts with whom these organizations must interact to secure support and funding. We hope that ultimately, these tools and the enhanced communication that is afforded by their use, will augment collaborative efforts of this community to realize their immediate goals and to have a greater impact in the long-term effort to end homelessness in the Austin / Travis County area.

The project is led by Dr. Laurie K. Lewis and Dr. Craig R. Scott. Both are professors at the University of Texas at Austin, Department of Communication Studies. Dr. Lewis specializes in the implementation of change programs in organizations and Dr. Scott specializes in the use of advanced communication technologies in workplace settings. Both have served as consultants to a variety of for-profit and nonprofit organizations concerning issues of communication.

CTOSH is a cooperative project of [The University of Texas](#), [The College of Communication](#), and [our supporters](#).