

Online nonprofit '4People' helps homeless, uninsured

System has reduced homelessness, helped thousands of kids get health care

By Dennis Cresswell
Managing Editor

A nonprofit organization to help connect people with the help they need, and to help local social services agencies serve their clients better, has become firmly established in the Tri-Cities.

The online system called 4People (www.4people.org) provides tools for information and referral, case management and more, and it has been slowly expanding throughout Washington state for 10 years.

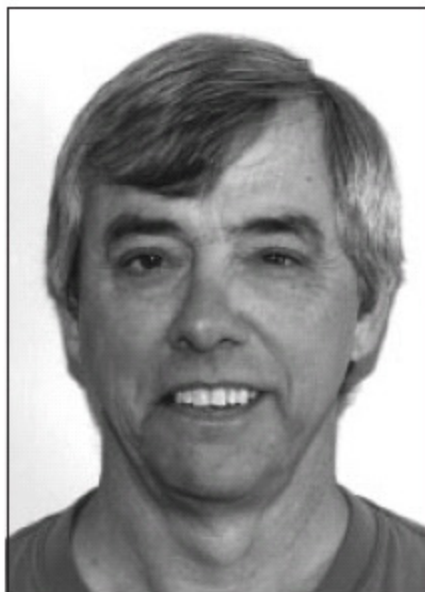
Bruce McComb of 4People says the service started in 1997 when a consortium of health-care providers, employment specialists and non-profit agencies in Chelan and Douglas counties came together with a common goal. They wanted to provide a comprehensive online database of human services in their area.

They chose a software program called Tapestry, created by VisionLink of Boulder, Colo. That software has since become the nation's leading system for community-integration applications, and it's employed by a wide range of government and nonprofit organizations. The same software has been used in disaster relief efforts for Hurricane Katrina victims.

In our area and in other counties, 4People has been credited with reducing homelessness and helping thousands of uninsured children receive health care. It is now used throughout the state for case management, disaster relief management, homeless shelter management and elder-care services as well as information and referral.

In 2000, 4People was introduced in Yakima County through the leadership of United Way, which assigned a full-time AmeriCorps volunteer to coordinate it. The following year, the consortium of agencies and health-care providers was joined by the RECA Foundation (Realizing Every Community Access). RECA has provided information technology (IT) support to low-income families and non-profit organizations in Benton and Franklin counties since 1992.

"RECA brings a great deal of experience in designing and running online resources for the community," McComb says. "But none of their designs proved to be self-sustaining. The 4People database has overcome



Bruce McComb

the sustainability hurdle."

RECA and its volunteers have taken on the administration and marketing of 4People in Benton and Franklin Counties. Faith-based groups can sign up for the service for as little as \$25 a year, while other providers pay considerably more. Donations have been received from Battelle, the Verizon Foundation, and individuals. Individuals can use the web site for free to help them connect with needed social services.

In 2004, 4People was formalized as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with a volunteer board of directors. AmeriCorps provides one full-time person through the RECA Foundation's Community Technology Centers Network. The Kennewick 4People received a federal grant in 2006 to carry on its work. A licensing agreement with VisionLink allowed the database software to be used in all 19 Eastern Washington counties.

The system allows county-specific keyword searches that yield detailed lists of services and agencies. Users may also click on a "County Resources" button for instant access to a comprehensive list with phone numbers and Web links. A "Hotline Web pages" button yields a list of state and national hotlines and Web pages. A printable "Family Resource and Referral List" is available for each county.

"The system is currently expanding to include the western side of the state," McComb says.

In Benton and Franklin counties, the Community Action Committee (BFCAC) took the lead in forming a consortium that includes BFCAC itself, the Department of Social and Health Services, the Kennewick Housing Authority, at least five faith-based organizations, the Benton-Franklin Health Department and a growing number of other health and human service providers.

Home Base provides assistance and support for the homeless and for refugees from Katrina and other disasters. It is credited with a 20 percent reduction in homelessness in one year.

In Yakima County, Kids Connect, another consortium, connects families with health care and health insurance. About 3,000 uninsured children are provided health care through Kids Connect.

"The Katrina disaster showed that no one organization can stand alone and help all the people all the time,"

McComb says. "We also learned that top-down management only works for those in the right place at the right time."

Some of 4People's expansion goals include:

- Increasing public awareness throughout the state (the federal grant is helping)

- Adding the western Washington counties to the information and referral database More fully developing 4People as a disaster readiness and relief resource

- Developing resource and referral lists" for youth and seniors

- Expanding the server capacity to include remote backup, mirrored sites and increased bandwidth.

You can help by sponsoring for the Web site, helping with public awareness and volunteering for day-to-day operations emergency standby. Visit the Web site at www.4people.org or contact 4People at 543-2910 or contact@4people.org.

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