

# SUMMIT VII.5: CREATING A SAFETY NET

## TECHNOLOGY & SERVICE DELIVERY FOR YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS



FRIDAY, MAY 5, 2017 • WYNDHAM GRAND HOTEL, DOWNTOWN PITTSBURGH

## OVERVIEW

On May 5, 2017, the Homeless Children's Education Fund (HCEF) convened a focused group of community stakeholders for a day of learning and dialogue focused on determining directly actionable steps to take toward the effective implementation of technology in support of youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The event drew diverse participants from HCEF's Homeless Education Network and others.

Summit VII.5 acknowledged the efforts of individuals in Pittsburgh who are striving to end youth homelessness, and it recognized the youth who are working hard to overcome the hardships of homelessness, as well as those who have already succeeded.

Summit VII.5 informed the attendees on how homeless youth currently utilize social media and explained some of the existing tools that can provide help for these youth. HCEF has a vision of an Allegheny County in which all youth have access to the social and web-based tools they need to better their lives. As social media use is pervasive today, especially among young people, it is essential that we work diligently to use social media to provide services to youth in need, as well as receive their feedback as to what we can do better to deliver services and connect them to educational and employment opportunities.

## WHAT IS A CONGRESS AND WHY ARE WE HERE?

### DR. WAYNE CENTRONE

*Senior Health Advisor,  
Center for Social Innovation*

Dr. Wayne Centrone encouraged the assembly to focus on technology and social justice. He invited participants to think about what's next with social media. He challenged the group to think realistically and concretely, but also to expand upon what is achievable and what the impacts would be. For example, how might BigBurgh become more than an app? Dr. Centrone set the stage for long-term thinking and creating action steps toward those ideas.



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# THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY TO ADDRESS YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

## DR. ERIC RICE

**Associate Professor,  
 University of Southern California  
 School of Social Work**

Dr. Eric Rice outlined his presentation of the presence of technology and social media among homeless youth, and how communities can use social media to service youth in need. He asked the audience to consider how social media is used to advocate and serve youth in the country, how it is currently used in Allegheny County, and what can be done better. He stressed the importance of social media to homeless youth, highlighted cities that have created apps to help the homeless (such as StreetConnect in California), and talked about the uniqueness of BigBurgh in Allegheny County. More homeless youth are beginning to obtain cell phones to help them communicate and connect to services. They find ways to access the internet (public Wi-Fi), even if they do not have data plans. Dr. Rice's research showed that most homeless youth are accessing the internet and social media every few days to communicate with others, including key adults in their life. He estimated 60% of homeless youth have access to cell phones.

His research recognized the importance of social media use by homeless youth and showed how they utilize it and with whom they interact most frequently. This research can help communities and organizations find ways to contact homeless youth and increase communication. During his study from

October 2011 to July 2013, Dr. Rice interviewed homeless youth at drop-in centers in Los Angeles to learn about when they access the internet, how they do it, and who they are contacting. He found 8% did not access the internet at all and 20% had not accessed it in over a week, but the remaining 72% had accessed the internet in the past 7 days. Roughly 80% of the youth who used the internet were using social networking sites, most often communicating with brothers, sisters, cousins, other family members, other people they knew, people they met online, and people they knew from home. The people they spoke to the least were caseworkers and employers, likely using email instead for professionalism, whereas social networking fulfilled their social life needs.

Finally, Dr. Rice asked the audience to brainstorm how to use this information to take advantage of social media for advocacy and networking. He challenged the audience to think of how youth can learn about existing apps such as BigBurgh, as many are unaware of them. Realistically, youth are usually not going to be friends with or follow their caseworkers on Facebook and Twitter, and many may have limited communication options with them already. Seeing that youth interact with peers most often, it is imperative that youth are educated about the apps available and taught how to use them. This way, they spread the information to each other.

*“There is no silver bullet for ending youth homelessness. But end it we can, if communities come together and work on the problem. Allegheny County is an amazing place, because the people of this community have begun over the past few years to meaningfully come together to work on the issue. It was so exciting to see a whole range of community stakeholders brainstorming about how technology-driven solutions could help to end youth homelessness. No single app or piece of software will put an end to youth homelessness, but the people of Allegheny County who are rallying behind technology-enhanced solutions can! I am honored to be a witness to these conversations, and I have great faith in your capacity to tackle this wicked challenge!”*

**- DR. ERIC RICE**





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## TRACK HUDDLE SESSIONS: CRAFTING THE PLAN – WHAT'S NEAR? WHAT'S FAR? WHAT'S ATTAINABLE?

Summit VII.5 participants organized into three small groups on different tracks to focus on topical, crosscutting themes with structured discussion questions. Each session included facilitators, whose role was to help shape and moderate a conversation around the track theme and provide subject matter expertise and input.

*“I was so excited and encouraged by the Summit. Everyone in attendance was very engaged and committed to working together to end youth homelessness. I appreciate everyone’s support and dedication to the cause and look forward to working with all stakeholders to affect positive change for youth experiencing homelessness!”*

**– CARLOS T. CARTER**  
Executive Director  
Homeless Children’s Education Fund

### TRACK 1 DISCUSSED HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN BE USED AS A “SAFETY NET” FOR YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS.

Young people experiencing homelessness are key to improving programs, as they are the ones experiencing housing instability and can provide direct feedback. Short-term goals need to be set in order to reach long-term goals. This track discussed having Wi-Fi access and hot spots all over the city and providing cell phone use for youth. The track huddle brought up the question, “How can we use technology to help Operation Safety Net?”

One area for improvement would be to better the relationship between youth and those who provide support outside their social circles, such as teachers, case workers, counselors, social workers, and volunteers. Ideas

discussed included trainings for educators about technology, including specific trainings on BigBurgh.com. It’s important that people who provide help to youth have knowledge about this app that can provide immediate help. The group also discussed methods to reduce the stigma about youth homelessness and help people understand and empathize with those experiencing homelessness.

Another way to bolster social safety nets with the use of technology is to determine who youth already interact with it. For example, members of University of Southern California’s Center for Artificial Intelligence in Society developed an Artificial Intelligence (AI) system called HEALER to help address the spread of HIV among homeless youth, who are ten times more likely to come into contact with HIV than their housed peers. HEALER measures social connectivity to identify peer leaders, those youth with a great influence in their social circles. These peer leaders were singled out for HIV prevention education and encouraged to share that information with anyone they know who could benefit from it.

The AI algorithm proved effective when the HEALER group of teens was compared to a control with randomly selected peer leaders. After one month, 50% of the HEALER group had been tested for HIV, as opposed to 33% of the control group, showing a statistically significant increase in the reach of a social worker’s message using this program, while decreasing the amount of time needed to communicate it.

In this case, the youth were acting as intermediaries. Young people use technology to communicate with each other, and, as seen from Dr. Rice’s survey and the HEALER algorithm study,

they speak to other young people the most. Targeting peer leaders is successful because youth are more likely to speak to their peers than those outside their social groups. Therefore, in order to make BigBurgh more than just an app, the track’s first short-term goal should be to leverage peer networks to increase awareness of it across Allegheny County for those youth experiencing homelessness and to bridge the communication with teachers, educators, and social workers.

Knowing that homeless youth connect more often with their peers than others, the group discussed a youth congress to raise awareness among students, reduce the stigma associated with homelessness, and offer information on resources in a large group setting to those who might not otherwise receive it for fear of self-identifying as homeless (i.e. if everyone receives the information, then no one is shamed for having sought it out).

The group also discussed the need for increased technology training for teachers, suggesting the possibility of an educator’s toolkit providing an outline of basic resources and technology (including BigBurgh) that they could use to help homeless youth. This toolkit could be distributed to schools, who could then disseminate to teachers in their school as needed and provide support that would allow them to become ambassadors for technology within schools.

Track 1 also focused on a phone recycling program offering smart phone access to those homeless youth who are still without; this was the group’s next action step. Members suggested reaching out to contacts at Apple, Verizon, Google, etc. to see what support the tech industry in the region could provide.



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### TRACK 2 DISCUSSED EXAMPLES OF CURRENT TECHNOLOGY USE IN SOCIAL SERVICES DELIVERY AND EDUCATION TO EXPAND THE INFLUENCE OF SERVICES AND ENHANCE THE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE.

This group noted the importance of taking advantage of technologies that already exist and using those to advocate for BigBurgh, as well as partnering with other nonprofits to advocate for teens and their needs. Working with other nonprofits would help pass the message along about BigBurgh, which will increase awareness, attract more volunteers, and provide the public with more knowledge about the issue.

In the study presented by Dr. Rice, about 79% of youth used Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Targeting existing social media is essential for educating the public and homeless youth. Track 2 discussed how articles and videos are always being shared on Facebook and Twitter feeds. For example, there are YouTube videos that feature people

giving back to homeless people, but there is rarely information about how to help people in need for the long run. Perhaps a video about BigBurgh and other nonprofits should be made for YouTube, and the video can then be shared on Facebook or Twitter. These videos would not only be viewed by youth experiencing homeless, but the general public can learn about BigBurgh and use their knowledge to help those in need.

### TRACK 3 DEFINED OPPORTUNITIES FOR RE-ENGINEERING OTHER TECHNOLOGY TO MEET THE COMPLEX AND DIVERSE NEEDS OF YOUTH AT RISK OF OR CURRENTLY EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS.

The group discussed the need for improved outreach to homeless youth in order to increase service delivery. While BigBurgh is an excellent tool, it can only provide services to those who use it; it is not an outreach tool. Track 3 discussed methods for outreach to increase awareness of services for the homeless youth population

including: collaborating with LA/Dr. Rice to use AI systems in conjunction with city/county data information to create targeted outreach based on predictive model (a la HEALER/peer leaders in LA); encouraging 412 Youth Zone participants and Youth Support Partners to network among peers as much as they are comfortable with; adding/improving BigBurgh physical/digital signage to libraries and universities (specifically food pantry info tables at CCAC/Pitt).

Additionally, members discussed the importance of bringing regular, easy internet access to those youth who still do not have it. Phone drives could bring smartphones to those without, but they would need to be ongoing to address breakage, technology obsolescence, etc. The track also discussed the possibility of providing up-to-date mapping of free, public WiFi spots that would be safe/comfortable to use for homeless youth. Mesh networks could also be used to connect youth without carrier plans to the internet via hot spots.

### TECHNOLOGY FOR YOUTH:

*BigBurgh.com meets the needs of youth-friendly searches, but how do we get this into the hands of youth?*

BigBurgh needs to be introduced to all adults and providers associated with homeless youth. Resources that exist in communities and Allegheny County are abundant and accessible. Educating all police officers, teachers, guidance counselors, neighbors, and citizens about BigBurgh will allow for early intervention.

We must work with youth to provide them with information so that they can pass it along to their peers. In order for this to work, we all must work together.

## DEFINING NEXT STEPS

We have much work to do to address youth homelessness. On May 5, our ongoing journey defined many tangible opportunities for our community. To build off of our current and past efforts in creating a safety net that will empower educators and social service providers, we must move forward in achieving the following objectives:

- 1) **To identify, organize, and educate youth leaders to engage their peers and school district personnel about youth homelessness.**
- 2) **To provide smartphones and the hardware to access supportive networks, including BigBurgh.com, to unstably housed youth.**
- 3) **To grow and expand internet access to our community.**
- 4) **To educate our community, utilizing student voices, about BigBurgh and other web-based platforms to address youth homelessness.**

May 5 was just the beginning. HCEF will be asking participants to walk and work with us on our continuing journey to end youth homelessness. Working groups to achieve the above four goals are forming now, and we need your help. Contact Chris McAneny ([cmcaneny@homelessfund.org](mailto:cmcaneny@homelessfund.org)) to be a part of the solution. Together, we can change our world.