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CONNECT NSV

MAKING ACCESS TO CARE EASIER

UNITED WAY OF NORTHERN SHENANDOAH
VALLEY

A UNITED WAY INNOVATION CASE STUDY





Since 2019, Nadine Bullock-Pottinga and Jennifer Hall at United Way of Shenandoah Valley have worked with Valley Health Systems in Northern Shenandoah Valley to build an advanced referral system, Connect NSV. The system combines

both technical and human infrastructure using the software platform Unite Us to share data to optimize Winchester area residents' physical and social health outcomes. After decades of clients living in poverty traveling from one agency to the next to meet their needs, Connect NSV is meant to be a one-stop shop for high-need clients to be referred to the resources they need most. The referral starts with the client indicating their needs through a questionnaire developed by United Way staff, so that the staff at the various partner organizations can refer the clients to where they can receive help.

BACKGROUND

United Way of Northern Shenandoah Valley serves a smaller community, spread out across Winchester, Frederick, Clark, Shenandoah and Page Counties in northwest Virginia. Even with a small-town feel, there are many social and health community-based organizations (CBOs) in the region serving those in need. United Way does a Community Needs Assessment every three years, and the 2017 Community Needs Assessment showed that the nonprofit community finds itself loosely connected to one another and often work with the same clients, but rarely communicate with one another about client care. Most agencies focus on meeting one need, whether that be food, housing, or clothing, and high-need clients are often doing their own research to determine where to turn for emergencies. Clients struggling with multiple needs must visit each CBO, do an intake, receive care, and then move on to look for other places to meet other needs. Clients complete one intake after another as they visit other CBOs to receive care, forcing the clients to re-tell their stories and spend more time getting care. Furthermore, at each CBO, clients might receive suggestions on other agencies to go to, but are never given a full, comprehensive list of resources. This cycle was draining for high-need clients and made getting help feel almost impossible. United Way was uniquely positioned to connect these organizations with one another and the needs of their communities to save time and money for the high-need clients they serve.

OVERVIEW

In October 2017, the United Way of Northern Shenandoah Valley created the [Valley Assistance Network \(VAN\)](#), a separate office with walk-in services in addition to a call center that serves as a first point-of-contact to help people meet various needs. The VAN staff, known as VAN resource navigators, have a list of the resources to which they can refer their high-need clients. Besides making referrals, VAN

resource navigators help clients design a plan of all the providers they will visit for each need before sending them on their way.

All these elements make VAN a one-stop shop for clients to connect with a wide network of services, rather than having clients pick through catalogues and debate where to go. VAN resource navigators also focus on helping clients address root causes that may prevent them from becoming financially stable, such as mental health or substance abuse issues.

Since 2017, VAN has helped nearly 3,000 households meet their basic needs and connect with local resources. The program has evolved since its launch; in its first two years, VAN started looking into ways they could track client outcomes and communicate with the other partners that they were referring to. VAN staff started researching data sharing opportunities and networks, and a couple of years later, there was finally an opportunity.

We respond to REAL Needs in REAL Time

TO MOVE FAMILIES FROM CRISIS TO STABILITY

Our Resource Responders screen clients and get them connected to services quickly, often helping solve multiple needs.

Utilizing technology, families receive financial assistance without ever having to leave home.

225
Resolved Cases

- 75 Evictions Prevented
- 88 Utility payments made
- 20 Families provided shelter
- 12 Health-related needs met
- 10 Transportation needs resolved

CORE COMPONENTS OF THE MODEL

Technology Partnership with Valley Health Systems

The technology component came along in 2019 when Valley Health Systems, the major hospital system in Winchester, reached out to United Way to see if they would like to partner with them on a data-driven effort meant to improve health outcomes. In partnership with George Mason University (GMU), Valley Health had secured a grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to launch the community's first coordinated care network and wanted United Way to help them carry it out. The health system and United Way shared the same goals of wanting to address the [social determinants of health](#).

The partnership was a successful demonstration of United Way's value-add. United Way is about fostering collaborations to solve human service issues and spearheading wide cross-sector partnerships. Together, United Way, GMU, and Valley Health launched Connect NSV in August 2019. Connect NSV is powered by Unite Us, a technology company which has already built many coordinated care networks in other states.

Per SAMHSA grant requirements, partners on the network are required to use an evidence-based assessment known as Screening, Brief Interventions and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT)¹ to identify substance misuse in the community and offer early intervention and treatment for people at risk. As of June 1, 2020, VAN has conducted 468 SBIRT screenings with 165 positive screenings and 87 referrals. These referrals go to Valley Health for intervention services for alcohol and drug abuse, and depression.

VAN serves as the administrator for Connect NSV and is also the coordination center. As the coordination center, if a partner agency does not know where the client should be referred, the partner can send the referral to VAN. As of now, VAN has distributed 20 licenses to staff at other organizations to refer people to other partners using the technology, such as housing assistance agency FaithWorks and nonprofit organization Catholic Charities. Catholic Charities has integrated it into their intake process for new clients.

Partner-to-Partner Referrals

VAN has also resulted in a rise in referrals being made directly to other agencies. A partner-to-partner referral means that partners can send them to other agencies to help them meet clients' most pressing needs or other needs. For example, after completing an SBIRT screening, Catholic Charities can make a referral straight to Valley Health.

The major ways that people are getting help on this network are for rent and utility assistance. The number of referrals to Valley Health for alcohol, drug, and depression issues is quite small relative to the overall number of referrals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 70% of the people who have reached out are seeking help for rent and utilities.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, VAN has been able to serve people without making them leave their homes. At one point, VAN helped one man get three different referrals in just 90 minutes all from his home.

COVID-19 RESOURCE CONNECTION CENTER

VALLEY ASSISTANCE NETWORK

Text "UWCOVID" to 44-321 to give instantly to the United Way NSV COVID-19 relief fund

Our Valley Assistance Network has seen call volume triple for people looking for assistance. This is the story of Clyde, a client who recently reached out for help:

THE JOURNEY TO GETTING HELP:

CLYDE

In less than 90 minutes

A Winchester man received assistance from 3 different agencies thanks to Valley Assistance Network and new technology.

2:18 PM

CLYDE REACHES OUT FOR HELP

Clyde had recently moved into a new apartment and because he used all his money to pay the security deposit and first month's rent, he needed assistance with the electric and water bills. Clyde is disabled and on a fixed income.

@VALLEY ASSISTANCE NETWORK

Staff receive a request for utility assistance through United Way's website. Volunteers reach out to Clyde to ask a few more questions.

VAN then sends referrals through Unite Us digital referral system to Faithworks and Highland Food Pantry.

2:39 PM

GETS HELP SETTING UP ELECTRIC FOR APARTMENT

The new system means people can receive assistance without ever leaving their home, saving Clyde a lot of time.

"I would have to go wait in line at 3 different places and tell my story 3 different times." - Clyde

@FAITHWORKS

Faithworks calls Clyde confirming his account balance and history. They then called the electric company to make a \$90 pledge, getting his electric turned on.

"VAN and the Connect NSW network are just what our community needed to bringing agencies together and support families in an efficient way!" - Sandi, Faithworks

3:25 PM

GETS HELP WITH WATER AND UTILITIES FOR APARTMENT

"WOW... I am so forever grateful. Thank You and your organization so very much for what you do!"

- Clyde

@HIGHLAND FOOD PANTRY

Highland calls and confirms he's eligible for assistance. He then contact a church and confirm his eligibility for help. Within minutes they confirm a payment of \$45 for the water bill and church assistance with the \$93 utility bill, payable to landlord.

"I love when it's this easy to help someone," said Carolyn Thalman, moments after resolving his case.

3:40 PM CASE CLOSED

How Connect NSV Works

The first step to completing a referral is filling out a form on United Way's website. The form immediately processes the information into Connect NSV. An employee from the agency must read the form and then make the referral based on the indicated needs. To make the referral, they use a resource list provided by VAN, which includes the names of resources in addition to information about how to make the referral.

VAN encourages partners to enter their existing clients into Connect NSV by filling out the online forms for them so they may track their outcomes using their data. Finally, VAN offers partners a *Cheat Sheet: Connect NSV Referrals Quick Guide* that lists the names of the partners and how to refer clients to them.



EQUITY FOCUS

The Connect NSV network is working to directly address health equity by making care networks stronger so people who have been historically disadvantaged may receive help faster and for a lower cost. It allows United Way to better serve working families because they can prevent them from having to go to five different agencies and tell their story five different times, or for example, having to take a day off of work to track down funding to pay their rent. With Connect NSV, providers across sectors can send and receive secure referrals, track a person's total health journey, and report on tangible outcomes. United Way's goal is to address the social determinants of health that are standing in the way of people leading healthy, successful lives.

211

Currently, the 211 network is not integrated in this plan. As United Way expands these data sharing efforts, 211 will provide help and access to services during after-hours. After-hours assistance will help to connect with individuals

in need outside of United Way's 40-hour week. Virginia 211's integration and success is also dependent on the cooperation of local agencies. Information provided by local agencies is not always thorough, nor accurate. The plan to integrate 211 remains in progress and will increase as United Way's network and referrals continue to grow.

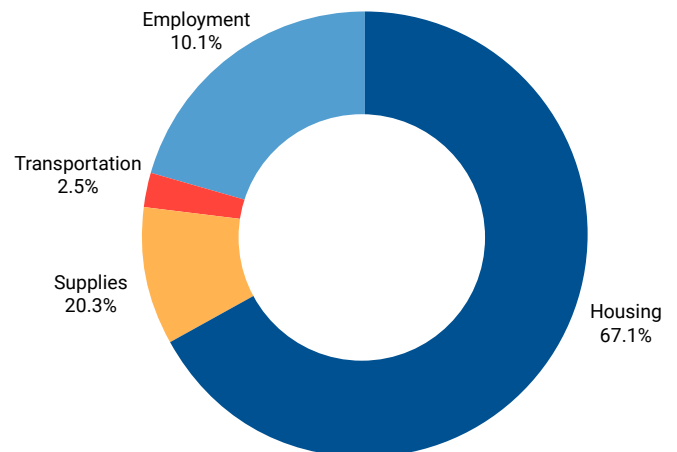
OUTCOMES

As of August 2020, Connect NSV has 20 agencies, and 49 licenses, made 1084 referrals received by partner agencies, and 1500 unique service episodes (i.e., unique requests for assistance), of which 45 percent are for housing and utilities. The grant originally allowed for 50 licenses but has expanded to 75 licenses. Every agency staff person using Connect NSV receives their own license, so up to 70 people will have the opportunity to use it. Some partners only have one license because they only have one person using it. Since Connect NSV is working with the hospital, they must observe strict compliance with privacy requirements, therefore logins may not be shared.

Much to their benefit, other community-based organizations (CBOs) have been advocating for the benefits of Connect NSV for them. They describe how Connect NSV has helped them with their own workflows. Recently, two existing partners helped onboard a larger partner without need for assistance from VAN.

COVID-19 Needs by Category

Through calls made to Valley Assistance Network



Connect NSV and COVID-19

In the first few weeks after COVID-19 hit, Connect NSV onboarded five new partners. Smaller agencies that once said they did not have capacity to integrate Connect NSV now realize that, because helping people in person is not feasible for now, they might not be able to operate without joining Connect NSV.

United Way is also offering funding from their COVID-19 relief fund to local partners who provide funding for their clients in need. Agencies who receive COVID-19 funding can then receive referrals for clients who are struggling. Several United Way partners have joined Connect NSV to access the funds.

Sustainability

The United Way and Valley Health are currently finishing up their first year of the five-year SAMHSA grant. In the future, they hope to obtain funding from Virginia Hospital and Healthcare Association, with hopes to initiate a state-wide rollout of Unite Us in the next couple of years.

ADVICE FOR OTHER UNITED WAYS

Engage Key State-run Stakeholders



- ▶ Increase the enrollment of state agencies such as departments of health and community service boards. Not only will onboarding them drive the enrollment of local organizations, it will provide the state with key information on smaller communities. Be alert to potential roadblocks in partnering with state agencies due to funding, compliance, and privacy concerns.

Encourage Cross Referrals between Partnering Agencies

- ▶ United Way would like more agencies to refer directly to other agencies rather than referring clients to VAN and having VAN refer clients to the most appropriate agency. Referring to each other directly gets them more engaged and communicative with each other so that VAN does not have to act as a gatekeeper.

Start Out with a Core Group of Trustworthy Partners

- ▶ Take it slow. United Way found it beneficial to onboard a few partners at a time to work out any challenges.

Stay Flexible in Order to Respond to the Changing Climate

- ▶ Before COVID-19 hit, United Way had settled into a consistent workflow of onboarding partners. This was completely disrupted once their partners had to move to remote work. United Way had to work with Unite Us to tweak their intake form. Also, there are agencies that are going to be out of funding every now and then. Agencies can stop accepting referrals if they're at capacity, and redirect a request somewhere else.

Build Relationships

- ▶ People, and their comfort level with the software, change regularly. This is why community engagement is so important. Make sure everyone is happy with it. It can take years to get buy-in from partner nonprofits. Care coordination is not something that you can jump into to do fast. Take the time to get the right people on board to talk about it and allow your partners to do the promotion for you, if possible.

Designate a Point Person to Handle Any Tech Challenges

- ▶ Be sure to designate a point person to handle any technology issues. Valley Health, GMU, and United Way used a little bit of extra money from the SAMHSA grant to hire a technology specialist. The specialist works in the VAN office and trains all the onboarding agencies to use it.

LINKS

Valley Assistance Network (VAN)
<https://www.unitedwaynsv.org/van>

United for ALICE
<https://www.unitedwaynsv.org/alice>

¹ Screening, brief intervention, and referral to treatment (SBIRT) is a public health approach to the delivery of early intervention and treatment services for individuals at risk of developing substance use disorders (SUDs) and those who have already developed these disorders.

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