

Project Gilead: Leveraging Technology to Deliver Faith-based Services

by
Francine Jefferson
TOP Program Officer

“Racial/ethnic healing in the faith community is absolutely critical in order to penetrate systemic socioeconomic problems, especially in a post-911 environment. In Greater Cincinnati, a key to the region’s current tensions is the active involvement of the multicultural/multiracial faith community in serving the needs of disadvantaged residents. There is significant social capital at stake with bridging the race/ethnic divide in the faith community.”

The Governor’s Advisory Task Force on Faith-Based Community Service Groups reported, “Every one of society’s major problems has been defeated somewhere and somehow by a faith-based or community group...” Through a partnership of interfaith service groups, business and industry, and the City of Cincinnati, Project GILEAD will “...network currently fragmented and disjointed faith-based services, and provide access to these services for Hamilton County, Ohio’s disadvantaged and underserved residents through customer-driven digital information and customer-friendly business processes”



The Greater Cincinnati civic infrastructure includes 2,047 socially active faith congregations, more than a hundred formal and informal religious organizations, and myriad faith-based agencies that promote values and economic independence. The “Balm-of-Gilead” candicans in this instance is an interactive digital web portal of faith-based services that will enable the 135,396 residents living within the Cincinnati Empowerment Zone, and in eleven other distressed communities, to access faith-based service providers.

In October, 2002, TOP awarded \$510,000 to the Ekklesia Development Corporation of the Corinthian Baptist Church to establish the nation’s first online service linking faith-based human service providers and their clientele in Cincinnati, Ohio. The basic design of the project is to make use of broadband access to the GILEAD Internet server, a scalable data repository and messaging infrastructure for rapid-response transactions. The long-term plan for the project includes handheld devices that GILEAD volunteers will use to access the Internet site through wireless connectivity. The project’s “consumers” include seniors, single-parents, the homeless, ex-offenders, unemployed and under-employed workers, and other at-risk residents who face difficulty accessing faith-based services. They will be able to perform searches, publish service requests, schedule appointments, and submit feedback to the project via online services, accessible free of charge.

Project GILEAD will provide solutions to the “disconnect” between the many services that faith-based organizations provide and those who are in the most need. These disconnects are

associated with: missing/out-of-date service information, search inefficiencies, no integrated tracking capabilities, and disjointed services.

Focus-group sessions are being conducted throughout the community to help project leaders better understand current problems, generate requirements, and to enroll persons to assist the launching of Project Gilead. On February 24, 2003, the project conducted a volunteers focus-group session. Two key points of discussion were information needed to make informed decisions about which faith-based service to volunteer for and the required central help-desk support.



A consumer focus groups was conducted on February 21, 2003, at Corinthian Baptist Church to discuss 1) barriers for economically disadvantaged citizens accessing faith-based services; 2) information needed to effectively and efficiently make service selection decisions; and 3) training needs. Additional volunteer focus groups have been scheduled at branches of the Public Library of Cincinnati and other consumer focus group sessions are being held at recreation centers operated by the Cincinnati Recreation Commission.



Citizen-centered e-government has been described as initiatives that strategically employ information technology to provide government products or services to intended users resulting in enhanced value. "Enhanced value" is characterized by improved cost-efficiencies, enhanced quality and availability of produce and/or service, improved timeliness, better

accessibility, and improved mission achievement. Project GILEAD's solutions to overcoming the barriers that make it difficult for underserved citizens to access faith-based services is a model both for faith-based initiatives and citizen-centered e-government.