
Community Weekend: Facilitating Social and Economic Opportunity

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Abstract

For people experiencing severe poverty in the United States, homelessness can be an involuntary symptom of a complex social ill. The cost of being homeless is the vicious cycle of deteriorating social support and increasing barriers to economic opportunity. A proposed local intervention—*Community Weekend* (CW)—presents people experiencing homelessness with a viable exit strategy based on human connection and *in situ* exposure to practical skills. Participation in the shared task of developing a new local business decreases stigma and establishes authentic ties between the homeless and the homed. A web-based visualization of each participant's evolving social network is generated effortlessly with sociometric badges. The CW connection manager provides a persistent means of contact even for those with transitory lifestyles.

Keywords

Homelessness, economic opportunity, social network, sociometric badge, startup company, community, empowerment, strengths, destigmatization

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

Many diverse factors—including poor education, drug abuse, natural disaster, and mental illness—contribute to the state of homelessness. Addressing any one factor in isolation seldom eliminates the risk of living without a home. Despite an increase over the last two decades in national policy and service organizations, the number of people experiencing homelessness is not in decline [1].

The holistic design presented here is based on a notion that homelessness is a *symptom* of complex societal dynamics driven by inadequate and inconsistent access to economic and social networking opportunities.

An Economic Perspective

The largest and most encompassing driver toward a state of homelessness is insufficient economic power. The common myth of the lazy homeless vagrant belies the reality of increasing costs of housing and health care that have far surpassed the minimum wage [6]. Work does not guarantee a *living wage*—the lowest amount of income that will meet basic needs of food, shelter and health care in a local economy.

Job training and employment agencies provide substantial help to engage disenfranchised people in regaining a stable economic status. Doe fund, Inc (doe.org) launched the Ready, Willing and Able program in 1990 as the first residential paid-work and training program for people experiencing homelessness in America. Other programs prepare economically disadvantaged and homeless individuals for livable-wage employment by helping in job searches, resume writing, access to technology, basic computer training, and job retention skills.

Street newspapers and magazines gained popularity last decade. Non-profit entities like the Chicago-based *Streetwise* employ impoverished locals as vendors and writers for bi-weekly newspapers. The papers are sold on the streets as an alternative to panhandling, not only supplying needed income but also providing empowerment through increased self-esteem, a media voice, and constructive interactions with other citizens.

A Social Perspective

Positive and frequent interaction with other people is vital to the emotional and physical well-being of an individual [2]. Social networks are composed of friends, relatives, colleagues, neighbors, and others who serve as resources for security, health and stability. Assisting people experiencing homelessness in their recovery of their social networks is “essential to solving one of their most critical problems: the inability to organize [10].”

A lack of social support and interaction worsens the effects of homelessness by constraining access to mental health support, minor resources—a key to managing the precariousness of transitional living—and other benefits of maintaining personal relationships [10]. Social interaction also brings stigma into the equation. Default perceptions of homeless as lazy, sick, stupid or dangerous are either carried into most street exchanges or influence the decision *not* to engage the poor, resulting in a relentless rejection [3].

Stigma can be internalized. The power differential between service staff and their clients contribute to a self-perception of being a *recipient*, rather than a partner in a social exchange. Long-term interest in self-improvement gives way to an irresistible and hopeless downward spiral of lowering self-esteem [10].

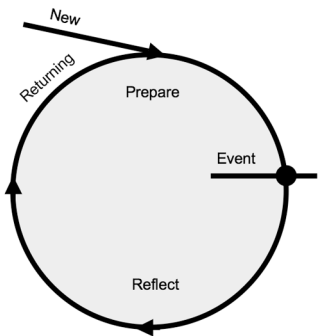


Figure 1. Virtuous Cycle

The month prior to an event emphasizes preparation in the form of meeting other participants, renewing old associations, and discussing possible ideas for a weekend project. Following the event is a period of reflection on the recent collaborative experience, which includes the reinforcement of new relationships and opportunity to capitalize on economic opportunities arising from the human interactions during the weekend.

In between events, these professional relationships are sustained through other forms of socialization, leading to meaningful connections across local economic circles and future CW recruiting. In this way, one event leads into another.

Additional Barriers to Opportunity

In addition to the effects of poverty and social disconnection, this population often encounters other challenges preventing escape from the cycle of homelessness. Stigma can be institutionalized through policy.

A lack of a permanent address presents obvious obstacles in communicating with governmental agencies, service organizations, and companies able to employment. Most of these resources are reliant on the completion of an address field in their forms.

Opportunities, appointments and benefits cannot always reach someone in need, due to their inability to follow up. Discouraged workers—people of legal employment age not actively seeking work—are usually created after failed job searches [11].

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, signed in 1987, remains the only major federal legislative response to homelessness [1]. Legal definitions for eligibility in the local programs it supports, however, often miss the 1.65% of the population who are precariously housed and at-risk of moving into homelessness [5].

A recent report by the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty criticized many major cities for restricting access to food, putting other concerns above basic hunger [4]. The National Coalition for the Homeless argues that even the term *chronically homeless* misrepresents the issue, downplaying the critical role of poverty and ambiguating the many contributing causes [9].

Constructing Connection

Overcoming these barriers requires a holistic approach at a systemic level that addresses the core dynamics of homelessness: inadequate social support, poverty, and stigmatization. By emphasizing communal economic opportunity, the shared task—rather than top-down charity—becomes the primary motivation to collaborate. Both the “homed” and “homeless” will see their personal professional networks expand and diversify, breaking down situational roles by humanizing their interactions.

Business Training as Usual

Many existing organizations serve homeless populations by providing employment or job training. However, the problem of homelessness is often defined literally with intervention focused on short-term financial aid, getting a paycheck, or simply securing temporary housing.

Initiatives like the Alpha Project's (alphaproject.org) STEP-UP are aimed at providing support specifically for economically disadvantaged people seeking transitional labor. These projects are typically neighborhood clean-ups and the upkeep of abandoned lots, requiring physical labor without developing more marketable skill sets or exposing people to permanent job situations. The London-based Off the Streets and Into Work (osw.org.uk) emphasizes access to individual skills training and strategy, but lacks the *in situ* experience of a real collaborative project with potential employers.

Virtual ethnography and focus groups conducted during the design process back the importance and desire of having effective career development strategies.

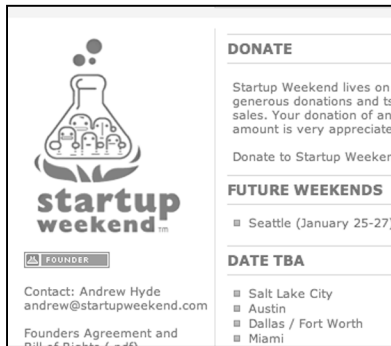


Figure 2. Startup Weekend

Organized locally, each SW event lasts three days. On Friday, participants are given their charge and spend the evening pitching ideas, voting to arrive at a single concept for a new business. Saturday is devoted to building the infrastructure, gathering requirements, prototyping and initial user testing.

By Sunday, the functional teams are focused on launching the web-based product. SW concludes with a vote on the future of the new company—Elect a CEO; Turn it over to a core team of 3-5 people; Continue to work on it nights and weekends; Sell it on eBay; or, Don't launch as all.

Blogs and online testimonials written by people in and out of homelessness describe the difficulty in simply completing job applications, let alone landing steady work. Social workers dealing with the daily struggles of displaced teenagers are looking to work with job centers and universities to conduct career assessments and provide *job shadowing* opportunities not otherwise available to their clients. Recent studies note that many disadvantaged job seekers are caught between a lack of social relations and the absence of effective local employment facilities [8].

While the people in poverty tend to view the value of income in terms of what the money can buy that day, advocates acknowledge long-term success in breaking a cycle of precarious housing requires a different strategy. "Kids don't want fast food," summarized a local social worker about job training.

Startup Weekend

One possible model for social training is Startup Weekend (SW). Created by entrepreneur Andrew Hyde in 2007, the company began as a one-time event in which 72 developers, coders, designers, lawyers, and web entrepreneurs gathered above a bicycle shop in Boulder, Colorado to build a new business from scratch. All participants shared 50% ownership of the resulting business. Since the entire process was made transparent through blogs and streaming media, Hyde's idea caught fire, spawning a parent company and weekends hosted in fourteen international cities [12].

While the shared central task has the potential to generate employment, the real value being constructed is the professional relationships that arise from working side-by-side with other motivated people.

As Tyler Willis wrote in the Los Angeles SW blog, "Startup Weekends are designed to allow for some craziness and chaos so that you forge communal connections and enjoy the experience, but I feel like we've all worked together for 6 months - it's a extremely well oiled machine [14]."

Equally important to the experience is the egalitarian nature of participation. The founders earning respect and support at the end of the week are the ones who contribute to the cause, not necessarily the participants coming to the weekend with the best pedigree. Participants are also exposed to new skills, expertise and technology in a situated context.

DESIGN SOLUTION

Community Weekend (CW) is our proposed framework for initiating constructive professional relationships in a format that reduces stigmatization.

Following the SW model, the central goal of developing a local business is achieved over the course of three days. Participants at the CW event make the decision about the nature of the business or new product. Weekend events are repeated throughout the year, allowing greater inclusion and benefit to emerge from the virtuous cycle of connection and re-connection. A web-based application—*Connection Manager*—is proposed to keep new and returning members of this community engaged through the cycle.

In addition to starting up a virtual company, weekend participants will have the option to *enhance* a local business or service. This brings to mind more of a communal barn-raising than a detached entrepreneurial investment.



Figure 3. Ad-hoc Sensor Badges

MIT's UbER-Badge—a wireless sensor node and wearable display badge—is a pre-existing proof-of-concept for the ad-hoc sensor network badges CW will wear at their weekend events. Multiple levels of detection and identification are met.

Our badge will include an IR channel to detect face-to-face contact up to 3 meters and facilitate remote networking with computer stations. An additional RF channel supports higher bandwidth communication across larger distances, potentially up to 100 meters with a simple wire monopole antenna.

Each badge will be tagged with a unique ID. In 1-3 minute cycles, proximity checks will be made. When another badge is detected, the association is logged for later download and analysis.

Connection Manager

To support the CW framework, we suggest the high-level design of an application to support universal participation and strengthen local human interconnectedness. The Connection Manager effortlessly collects relational signatures at the event and turns them into longitudinal visualizations of each person's evolving social graph. The system can be described by its three major functions: *Data Collection*, *Visualization for Search*, and *Social-Professional Utility*.

Relational links between participants are collected as part of each person's natural routine during the task-oriented collaboration. Adding IR and RFID technology to standard access badges worn over the neck creates an ad-hoc sensor network. The badges detect and log anyone in the proximity while still serving the non-technical functions of visual identity and security. This data is then read and downloaded from fixed database access points, such as a sign-in or banquet table.

Most efforts in smart badge research are location-based, where a person walks to a stationary beacon and received contextual information. Research out of MIT has demonstrated the feasibility of person-to-person awareness [7, 13], although serving broader purposes than CW requires. Our badges need only to identify others nearby and record a time-stamped association between two people.

In the visualization, individuals are nodes, and the *in situ* associations between them are links. Filters—determining start and end times, strength of association, depth of network neighborhood, and individuals involved—can be applied to the aggregated data through sliders and pictorial toggles in the user

interface, facilitating time-elapsd exploration. Through a user-generated folksonomy and official CW tags reflecting the scheduled events and activities, simple one-click shortcuts can set filter parameters and help individuals recall the relevant social structure of a given moment of a weekend. Additionally, an auto-play option leverages the timestamps to create a movie depicting the evolution of the social graph.

These visualizations are useful both for reflection after the event—where one might wish to recall a particular moment, or reach out to CW colleagues with the strongest associations—and during the time leading up to the next event, when prior friendships are renewed.

When working together, bonds form naturally and are reinforced through small talk and expressions of appreciation. In order to maintain and expand on the social nature of the weekend, integration with other local resources is essential. Connection manager will keep pace with evolving standards for communication between social networking and information sites. Doing so improves the value to new Internet users or those with a scattered history of online access.

Lowering Barriers

CW has a stronger focus on local economics than SW, including emphasizing the stabilizing role service organizations can play in bridging economic gaps.

Special attention is given to the inclusion and retention of people who might not otherwise participate, due to economic or social struggles. By targeting participation from service organizations, underrepresented but highly motivated people will be given an opportunity to contribute to the community collaboration. During the

