

Ray Rogers:

I am Ray Rogers.

Annie Evans:

And I'm Annie Evans.

Ray Rogers:

You are listening to Fix This, a podcast exploring tech ideas and solutions to some of today's largest challenges.

Annie Evans:

In season one of Fix This, Ray sat down with Community Solutions, a nonprofit leading the charge to end homelessness through its Built For Zero program. Built For Zero is a movement uniting with cities across the US to bridge strategy and support to reduce homelessness. This month we are checking back in with Community Solutions team to see how it is continuing to use Amazon Web Services (AWS) to unlock data, to measure and monitor its progress. And this time we are joined with representatives from the nonprofit Coming Home of Middlesex County, based in New Jersey.

From logging and capturing all adults experiencing homelessness to being able to understand how to best support and reduce chronic homelessness. Middlesex County and Community Solutions have worked together to make strides towards a future where no one is left behind. To learn more, I sat down with members from the Built For Zero infrastructure team and Coming Home of Middlesex County, take a listen.

Lauren D'Amico:

Hi all. My name is Lauren D'Amico and I'm a member of the Built For Zero System Infrastructure team.

Eileen O'Donnell:

My name is Eileen O'Donnell. I'm the executive director of Coming Home of Middle Six County Inc.

Christiana Osawe:

My name is Christiana Osawe. I'm the Assistant Solutions Navigator at Coming Home on the Coordinated Assessment team.

Annie Evans:

How do your two organizations work together and what is the ultimate goal?

Lauren D'Amico:

Community Solutions is a national nonprofit with a mission to create a lasting end to homelessness that leaves no one behind. And in order to propel this movement to end homelessness up and over a tipping point, we work with communities to really solve the most persistent challenges that stand in their way through the use of rigor and these data driven solutions, we really work with communities to understand how they could prevent inflow into homelessness from happening in the first place.

How they could build and sustain homeless response systems that can continuously end rather than manage homelessness for populations across their certain geographies. And then quickly deliver

affordable housing that can help close that housing gap. Community Solutions powers the Built For Zero Movement, which is a national initiative of more than a hundred communities that are really working to equitably and measurably end homelessness.

Eileen O'Donnell:

The ultimate goal is to end homelessness. And so you need to do that through intensive use of data down to a granular level because once you've met one homeless person, you've met one homeless person. So you really need to know who's homeless, why they're homeless, what the barriers are? And so you really do have to dig deep. There's no one size fits all solution. What we want to do, especially since we're a new organization and we're developing a non-siloed approach in the county to serving homeless persons, we don't want people to say, "well, we're just going to do this program because we've always done this program," or, "we're going to do this program because there's money for this program," either through the state or through the Fed federal government.

We want to be able to say, "we're going to do this program because there's a specific need for this program in our county, and guess what? We've measured it along the way and it works." So specifically with Community Solutions PDSA model, which is Plan, Do, Study, Act, we've been able to implement that strategy even more intensively and to spread that throughout the other service agencies in our community.

Annie Evans:

When you were first getting started in your own collaboration here, what was the first or the most essential part you needed to establish before you could really hit the ground running?

Eileen O'Donnell:

The first goal we had was creating a by name list, was making sure that we knew the names and the locations of everyone who was homeless in the community. But I think the first goal was to establish a baseline.

Lauren D'Amico:

Within the Built For Zero initiative, communities really are working to measurably end homelessness at a population level, and to do this we really help them think about what do they need to have in place within their communities to be able to not only set those goals but also achieve them? So part of the Built For Zero methodology really enables communities to sort of create the shared accountability. So moving away from having sort of one single actor or agency responsible for ending homelessness in a community, to moving to this concept of a command center that shares the accountability. So thinking about who are your major actors or agencies in your community and how can we get them all working together towards the same goal and same mission?

In addition to that, of course Eileen had touched on this, establishing and using quality real-time data. Traditionally, a way that communities have measured their homeless populations is through the use of a point in time count, which is sort of an annual census count. It gives you sort of a baseline for that year to expect that on any given night we should anticipate to have this number of homeless individuals and families within our system. What we are beginning to understand is, while that is a powerful metric and it gives us a really good place to start planning and looking for gaps in our resources, it's not comprehensive enough. We really need to get more to a place where we're looking at our data more regularly. So, we're moving to that comprehensive real-time by name data that we're analyzing on a monthly basis to really ensure that we're making progress towards our goals. And then finally really

helping communities organize around how to make targeted investments for the reductions in homelessness.

Annie Evans:

And Eileen, when did your community start working with this Built For Zero program and how is it helping you see a difference in your community and make progress towards your goals?

Eileen O'Donnell:

So we started out changing the culture by using a new HMIS system and getting people to... We had a train on that. So we had a physical function and activity around which all the community members could coalesce, and that helped. That was a really good jumpstart in changing the culture to say that we're a system, we're not just individual programs or individual agencies working towards this goal. The second step in that was creating a coordinated assessment process that was actually a HUD regulation, a good regulation by financial regulator I might add, and so what was to create a single point of entry.

Well, all service agencies collaborated together on this goal for a year. They pilot tested certain assessments, didn't like it, kicked it to the curb, tried something else. So that was the second big step in creating the system mentality and that we're all working together and we need to measure our baseline and our progress toward shared goals and not individual programs.

And then in 2015, I think it was, we acquired a new board member who actually was also working for Community Solutions who turned us on to Community Solutions as the national consultant, if you will. And we realized at that point that we spoke similar language and we had our board members say, "oh, you get this, you get us." I'm like, "oh, no, no, we do not have it all figured out." "We can..." And, "no, that's fine, but you're already there speaking that language and we can help you move further along."

Annie Evans:

What actually are you tracking as part of your work to streamline eradicating homelessness?

Christiana Osawe:

We created an aim earlier this year and we said that we wanted to reduce our overall homeless numbers by 50% by June of 2024 as a community and as a system. And so when you share something like that to the individuals that are actually doing the work, they don't know what that means. They have no clue what a 50% reduction looks like. They have no clue how we're going to do that by June 2024. They just don't know what that is. And so we needed to provide context to that. And so we said, "okay, so if we're able to break down that aim by separate goals, then we'll be able to actually visualize that goals with data." And so we made some smaller goals that we could basically present to individuals to say, "Hey, this is where we started and this is where we're starting from, as of June is when we started this project and this is where we're going."

And so we're looking at our inflow data. What would happen if we decreased our inflow data by 20% every six months? How will that affect our numbers? How will that affect our overall homeless data? And then we also are looking at chronic homeless, and we know that our chronic homeless population, not only that they make up a large percentage of the homeless individuals that are in our community and that are on our by name list, but they're also the individuals that have been suffering the longest. And so we're constantly looking at ways to decrease the amount of time that they're suffering, but also decrease the number of people that we have within that population that are suffering as well too. So that's something that we're constantly looking at and bringing before our community. And that's

something that we track using Built For Zero's tools and their Tableau Dashboard on their website as well too.

And then we wanted to talk about family homelessness, and we realized that a number of individuals that we had on our by name list experiencing family homelessness was small enough to where we can actually create a goal to end it completely and work towards even just ending it and then sustaining that end within the next year. And so we presented that to our community as well too. We showed them how many individuals were actively... How many families were actively homeless, and what it would look like for us to end that by 2023, which is our current goal right now.

Annie Evans:

How has the cloud enabled to help Built For Zero and Community Solutions sort of offer this help? And so how has the cloud either transformed or just helped your organization outside of just providing the framework?

Lauren D'Amico:

Part of our goal when we were designing it and thinking about what the Built For Zero framework and measurement goals were for the initiative, it gave us an opportunity to really take data that we were getting from communities. They report to us on a monthly basis, eight metrics that we have them track that relate to their overall actively homeless numbers, and then really hone in on their inflow and outflow categories.

So we took this data, this aggregate numbers that we were getting from communities month over month and began utilizing Tableau resources to help build out, we call them our Performance Management Tracker Dashboards. So it's a suite of visuals that really allow communities the opportunity to have a place that they can go and look at run charts of their monthly actively homeless numbers month over month to identify areas that they are making downward trends below their improvement medians, which to us would start signaling the start of a shift.

There's something significant happening within that community's system and the change ideas that they're implementing, something's working. We want to go back and work with that community and really investigate on what's going well? How can we continue to scale that up? So it's really given communities a resource to be able to go and reference and then share those visuals with the rest of their communities as part of kind of building that data culture within those local contexts, speaking that shared language, and really driving towards those shared goals.

So I think utilizing that suite of dashboards that we host on a website through the cloud enables communities access to that type of improvement dashboard and that type of analysis that they haven't had access to previously. A lot of communities do fantastic work with doing dashboards or creating graphs to show progress in their local context, but this was really one of the first times that we had a collective space for them to not only have visuals built out for them, but visuals that were going to help them continue to drive progress within their communities.

And in addition to the visualizations that we host and create for the communities participating in the Built For Zero movement, through that website, we're also able to really build out change packages. So collections of resources related to some of the best practices or bright spots and giving examples and opportunities to spotlight communities who have done a really innovative, powerful improvements within their systems that move their needle. We want to be able to harness that and share it with the rest of the network so that there's strength in numbers, there's knowledge and sharing that.

So how do we really take what's working well from one community and help another community that's clear across the country, kind of implement similar programs and to see if they're going to have similar impacts? So at the end of the day, we're looking at numbers, but we also understand that those numbers are representative people. So we really want to be able to ensure that we are measuring and have a way to collectively understand how people are coming to our system, how they're moving through the system, and where they're exiting the system to.

Annie Evans:

How do you see this impacting your community and the people that you're working with on a day-to-day basis?

Eileen O'Donnell:

We're now working to build a program called Our Housing Support Team. We are part of the community Solutions property engagement cohort with the benefit of experience in communities across the country. They're helping us to best design our program and to complete a database of existing units by existing landlords and any type of affordable housing properties in our community. And that's where I see the future of our work with, and we're going to continue on doing the program improvement and the data improvement and measuring inflow and characteristics and barriers. But I really see this as a new frontier, at least for Middlesex County, is to be working on having a database of resources and improving that database of resources and working on developing more resources to and homelessness.

Annie Evans:

What keeps you excited about your work? What keeps you optimistic? What keeps you jumping out of bed in the morning and continuing to do this?

Eileen O'Donnell:

I'm not sure I jump every morning, but I do get out of bed every morning. The fact that it is, I think somebody said in the very beginning, it's incredibly complex, the issue of homelessness. Because there's not one reason a person becomes homeless. There's not one reason why a person is in poverty. So many different sectors are involved, so many different factors of a person's life is involved. So it's never boring. And there's always new ideas. I have a great team here. Everybody's committed to the goal and there's always new ideas. And I hopefully, and I think I do, give people the freedom to develop their new ideas and new programs. Showing people changing the face of homelessness all the time, ending the stigma. That's a daily occurrence that we're always up against, but it's a message. It's a message that we are particularly adept at giving. And so we're going to keep on giving it, and that's what keeps us going.

Lauren D'Amico:

To be completely honest, it's responses like Eileen had just given. Just that excitement and really being able to see communities make these reductions and achieve goals in these really complex systems. And I feel very privileged to be able to get to help communities think about different and new ways to not only approach their data analytics and use data to drive their improvements, but also to help skill them up.

Being able to not only bring skill sets to folks that are working on the ground, but also helping them really establish and understand that shared language and giving them resources and reminders that they aren't alone. That there is a whole country full of people in various communities across our country and really internationally that are focused and really, really committed to helping people access housing, to

reducing the number of people that we have sleeping in shelters and in unsheltered locations, and really just proving that there can be an end to this. We don't have to accept that we will always have homeless people within our communities, that we could actually make a lot of progress to giving our neighbors, those friends a home at the end of the day.

Annie Evans:

If you like today's episode, listen back to episode 68, Eliminating Barriers To Food Security With The Houston Food Bank, to learn how one nonprofit is using the cloud to improve food accessibility or dive deep into the archives and stream episode eight, to hear how Community Solutions began their journey to eradicate homelessness on AWS. And remember to join the conversation on social media with #FixtThisbyAWS. And as always, a huge thank you to our guests, Lauren, Eileen, and Christiana.

Ray Rogers:

And thank you for tuning in. If you'd like today's show, please remember to subscribe, rate, review, and share. We'll be here on the next one.