

Mind the Gap: Mapping Community Resources

Katelyn L. Ehle
University of North Carolina at Asheville
Political Science

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ken Betsalel
Community Advisor: Mary Ann McMinn, Eblen Charities

Abstract

With the recent downturn in the economy, many in Western North Carolina have suddenly found themselves in crisis. While I have previously explored poverty in the region through various Political Science classes here at UNC Asheville, I found that I was unable to make the impact I desired within the constraints of the classroom. With this project, I was interested in figuring out how those who find themselves in need of assistance are able to connect with local programs that are able to provide service. Upon investigation, I found that the most popular current resource was incomplete and that the level of information a client could expect to receive varied by agency. This prompted me to work with a local organization, Eblen Charities; which provides Health, Energy, Education, Housing, and Emergency Assistance to families and individuals in the Asheville area. The Eblen Directory of Community Services Handbook & Resource Guide is the product of my research focused on the programs offered throughout the Buncombe County area. The directory offers residents of Buncombe County a complete directory of organizations which offer assistance programs, categorized by the type of help individuals could receive. Through this project, I hope to provide a service for families across Buncombe County, ensuring equal access to helpful information, regardless of where they turn for help.

Key Words: Community Assistance Resource Guide Eblen Charities

Origins of the Project

I began my work on this project after volunteering with Eblen Charities during their Saint Nicholas Project toy drive. As I worked with the organization, I came to learn that the methods available to clients seeking help in Buncombe County tended to be haphazard. This was not only the case at Eblen Charities, but also true of other non-profit and advocacy organizations I have worked with in the past as a Political Science major here at UNC Asheville.

Eblen Charities is a non-profit organization located in Asheville, NC, which provides health, energy, education, housing, and emergency assistance to children, adults, and families in the surrounding community.¹ Joe Eblen, President of the Biltmore Oil Company, began Eblen Charities in 1990 as a golf tournament to raise money for Cystic Fibrosis. Today, Eblen runs over 70 programs across Western North Carolina to address these needs including the Mission of Mercy dental clinic and the Saint Nicholas Project to help provide toys to needy children on Christmas.² Eblen is run in a spirit of helping people thrive by providing for the needs which would otherwise be forgotten or deemed unimportant by other organizations.

Generally, when a client comes to a non-profit organization for assistance, they are randomly assigned a counselor, who may or may not be familiar with every appropriate program or resource available in Buncombe County. The importance of these programs for community members is outlined in *Rural Families and Work*. Families often rely on an informal network of support to assist them when they struggle to meet their needs.³ In the event that this informal network fails, families tend to turn toward more formal support resources:

“Formal social support resources may include cash assistance, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC); Medicaid; food programs such as food stamps (now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), school lunch, and emergency food assistance; housing assistance and the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP); employment and education assistance; child care subsidies; and/or emotional support from human service providers, such as mental health counseling and compassionate conversation”.⁴

Clients who need specific information about where to turn for help outside of government assistance are at the mercy of fate, as the quality of their information and referrals usually depend on the counselor and program to which they happened to be assigned.

Often, information and guidance regarding these and other programs varies across organizations.⁵ Certain clients may even find that fostering personal relationships with knowledgeable and respected counselors at social support agencies leads them to receive a higher quality of assistance at a quicker rate than they would if they had simply walked in to another agency.⁶

¹ *Eblen Charities*

² *ibid*

³ *Rural Families and Work*

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

This is unsettling because it means that every client does not receive the same advice or assistance. This opens the door for a counselor's personal biases or feelings to affect the quality of service a client can expect to receive. In certain cases, clients who need special services may be turned away from help they are eligible to receive simply because the counselor to whom they were assigned was unaware that there is an existing program that could meet their need. Overall, the system was flawed.

After meeting with representatives of Eblen Charities, I learned that this was not only the case with assistance from organizations outside of the Eblen Charities network, but internal programs as well. Eblen Charities did not have a comprehensive internal directory of their services. This further complicated the process for clients, who could not reasonably expect to be provided with the same services from Eblen Charities as another client with the exact same need.

The United Way's 2-1-1 of WNC Directory is one answer to this issue here in Buncombe County. The 2-1-1 Directory is currently the local accepted standard directory of services. It has also been an integral part of non-profit work in the area and is a wonderful resource for providers. However, alongside my advisors at Eblen Charities, I discovered that the resource was incomplete and that Eblen Charities' own entries were inaccurate and redundant in the 2-1-1 Directory. This prompted us to conclude that a comprehensive supplement to the United Way's directory was necessary, drawing information from resources outside of what the group had already accomplished.

Methods of Work Undertaken

For this project, I worked with Eblen Charities to create a comprehensive database of the programs and services available to Buncombe County residents in need of a variety of financial and other aid. Once the information has been completely collected, sorted, and verified, it will be published for use by members of the public and stored at Eblen Charities' Waddell Client Center. The Eblen Community Resources Directory is divided into eight sections including: Clothing, Domestic Violence, Food, Healthcare, Shelter/Housing, Transportation, Utility, and Special Needs Assistance.

The purpose of this resource guide is to help nonprofit counselors and other interested members of the community to direct clients to appropriate and available community resources. Upon learning that the information dispensed to individuals who request help from service organizations varied greatly by individual (as discussed later in this report), I worked with Eblen Charities to create a resource which could be used to guide all clients toward the resources which could best serve them in a fair and appropriate manner.

Throughout this project; I researched local social service organizations, collected data on services available, and sorted this data into useful and appropriate categories. Additionally, I analyzed this data in order to better understand where gaps had formed between community need and organizational provisions. Due to the amount of data involved in creating such a database, alongside the widespread (and often intangible) nature of this data, my work on this project required an extensive amount of time hunting down vague leads.

This work left me at times feeling desperate and exasperated. The effort it takes to find appropriate resources to meet specific needs cannot be understated. Without the help and guidance of the Eblen Charities staff, as well as the countless other non-profit organizations here in Buncombe County, I concluded that many area families would certainly struggle to find the resources to help make ends meet.

Ties to Academia

As a Political Science student, I am confronted daily with the social and economic realities faced by our community. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's *Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates*, in 2011, between 38,053 and 47,477 people residing in North Carolina found themselves living below the poverty level (defined by the Census Bureau as an annual income of less than \$11,484 for a single adult).⁷ This means that between 16.2% and 20.2% of North Carolinians are currently living below the poverty threshold established by the Census Bureau.⁸ In Buncombe County in 2010, this translated to 1 in 5 children living in poverty.⁹

The North Carolina Commission on Workforce Development found that the recent unemployment rates for North Carolina have been higher than those for the rest of the nation as a whole.¹⁰ The commission found that some of the main factors of this high unemployment rate were gaps in education. As of 2010 in Buncombe County, fewer than 1 in 3 residents had obtained a 4 year degree education or higher.¹¹

An individual with a Baccalaureate (4 year) degree was half as likely as the average worker to find themselves unemployed.¹² Meanwhile, an individual without a high school diploma was twice as likely as the average worker to be unemployed.¹³ The Commission found that these lower-skilled workers, tending to have higher rates of unemployment, required significantly greater resources from social service agencies during the recent recession.¹⁴

As of January, 2013, the unemployment rate for Buncombe County was 8.1%.¹⁵ While this is slightly lower than the statewide unemployment rate for North Carolina, 9.5%¹⁶ (seasonally adjusted); it is still higher than the national unemployment rate of 7.6% (seasonally adjusted).¹⁷

The strain of economic hardship does not fall on every family in equal proportions. "There is actually no single economic 'state of America' but rather an America that is experienced

⁷ Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ 2010 Buncombe County Community Health Assessment

¹⁰ Commission on Workforce Development

¹¹ 2010 Buncombe County Community Health Assessment

¹² Commission on Workforce Development

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ Employment Security Commission of North Carolina

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Bureau of Labor Statistics

differently, and often unequally—not only by class, [...] but by race and gender. For example, a review of employment rates from 1979 to 2011 shows that Black and Hispanic unemployment always far exceeded white unemployment”.¹⁸

To make matter worse, high unemployment rates have repercussions beyond individuals who are struggling to find work. The large number of unemployed workers acts as competition for those who are gainfully employed in the same field. In a classic example of the effects of supply and demand, the surplus of workers lowers employee bargaining power and works to stifle wage growth.¹⁹ A combination of high rates of unemployment and wage depression means that families in Buncombe County have a more difficult time affording basic necessities. Those without informal networks of support find themselves relying on formal social service providers (such as Eblen Charities) to meet their needs.

In terms of this project, this lined up quite well both with what I have witnessed while working at the Eblen Charities’ Waddell Client Center and what I’ve learned in my Political Science classes here at UNC Asheville. As minorities in the state are less likely to be able to find employment, the market value of the group goes down.

This means that as a whole, black and Hispanic residents are at a greater risk for needing the services provided by the programs listed in the Eblen Directory of Community Services Handbook & Resource Guide. As these programs are not widely advertised, and admittedly difficult to find, minorities in the states are put at a disadvantage. Without a resource such as this project, the spiral of structural oppression continues as individuals are not properly informed about their options and suffer as a result.

During my time as an undergraduate here at UNC Asheville, I have also been lucky enough to intern for County Commissioner Holly Jones as well as the YWCA’s Women’s Services department. While working with Commissioner Jones and the YWCA, I worked extensively with the United Way’s 2-1-1. Here I was first exposed to the system of clients and counselors as a pathway to community support.

This project was my first experience following the same processes that families in need of assistance within Buncombe County would have to go through to receive the help they need. These internships inspired me to look deeper into poverty and need in our community. As a graduating political scientist, I cannot help but ask about the systems in place around me. Jones and the YWCA, alongside my advisors and colleagues at Eblen Charities, gave me insight into the importance of understanding and improving these systems.

Challenges Faced and Response to those Challenges

The biggest challenges to this project were the prevalence of a similar resource, the United Way’s 2-1-1 of WNC Directory; and the difficulty with which information regarding services is

¹⁸ State of Working America

¹⁹ State of Working America

obtained through other sources. Throughout the project, I struggled to avoid copying the United Way's 2-1-1 of WNC directory while dealing with the fact that other sources of information tended to be inferior.

As mentioned earlier in this report, the United Way's 2-1-1 of WNC is currently the accepted standard directory of social service providers in the area- and rightfully so.

According to the United Way's 2-1-1 of WNC website, in 2012 there were 42, 234 calls to the 2-1-1 hotline and 11,945 visitors to the 2-1-1 of WNC's website and mobile applications.²⁰ Of those, 47% were in need of referrals to appropriate resources and 43% were calling with specific questions regarding services. The number one need in Buncombe County was Housing and Utilities, and the number two need was Health Care. Notably, 52% of the resources listed in the United Way's 2-1-1 of WNC are non-profit organizations while 48% are public or government providers.²¹

The 2-1-1 of WNC is an excellent resource for community members in need of assistance. The popularity of the resource posed a challenge to my work because I wanted to ensure that I wasn't simply rewriting an already stellar resource.

Additionally, this resource also features a phone number (# 211) which residents of Western North Carolina can call to be referred to resources in the area. This links residents who may not be able to access the internet or physically travel to vital information.

I addressed this issue by first limiting my search to Buncombe County. Due to the limited time and resources of this project, I decided early on that (unlike both Eblen Charities & The United Way) I would have to limit my work to Buncombe County. This limit helped to ensure that the information in the Eblen Community Resources Directory is unique to the area and could be more accurate than other publications in regards to local resources. The United Way is a national organization and 2-1-1 directories are available to about 90% of Americans.²² The wide scope of the United Way's directory makes it easy to understand how inaccuracies, redundancies, and dead-ends could arise.

I also found that by personally contacting local agencies to ensure that the information I had was correct, I could provide a more accurate resource than what could be found in the United Way's 2-1-1 of WNC directory. My goal with this project was not to reproduce information which is readily available from the United Way's 2-1-1 of WNC, but to ensure that members of the community receive equal access to information regarding services when they visit local non-profit organizations.

While searching for and sorting through information regarding social services in Buncombe County outside of the United Way's directory, I found that other sources of information tended to be scattered and obscure. Additionally, information that was readily accessible was often riddled with inaccuracies or much too vague to be of any actual help. As a result, throughout this project, I relied heavily on word-of-mouth referrals and internet searches to find the information I needed. This translated into an exhausting search of local community organizations, albeit, one

²⁰ 2-1-1 Annual Report: Buncombe County

²¹ ibid

²² ibid

that I feel will greatly benefit the community.

Results

As I worked with Eblen Charities on this project, I personally tried to maintain a focus on the gaps in community needs and community provisions. I undertook this project in part because I was interested in understanding the areas where our community is failing to deliver the resources that individuals find necessary and also the areas where there might be an overabundance of programs where there is not so much need.

The preliminary numbers for the resource guide show that significant gaps exist in Western North Carolina between the need for housing and the availability of programs assisting community members with housing. Furthermore, I have noted that short-term emergency assistance programs, such as food pantries and clothing closets, exist in abundance in Buncombe County through churches and private institutions.

However, long-term assistance for “established” community members, such as housing and utility programs, is less readily available. While I am in no position to insinuate that these programs are not necessary or that they are not being used, I found it interesting that many community programs focus exclusively on those who have found themselves hitting “rock bottom” rather than those who may have been comfortable before but that recently fallen on hard times.

There are many possible explanations for this trend. It is possible that those who find themselves in the most extreme financial situations are simply more visible than those who struggle to make ends meet quietly. Additionally, the current regional political climate is one which places an emphasis on individuals working toward their own success. Placing the responsibility for fighting poverty squarely upon the shoulders of those who suffer from it means that there is little public or private support for those in less extreme situations in the region.

In my work on this project I was not surprised to find that many of the programs I researched were either explicitly religious or backed by a religious organization. While there are usually no faith requirements one must meet in order to be served by these programs, I found that these organizations made up a substantial amount of the assistance available in Buncombe County. A good explanation and exploration of this phenomenon can be found in *Rural Families & Work*:

“Scholars who have specifically investigated individuals and families in the Appalachian region have suggested that Appalachian identity is strongly linked to faith, kin relationships, and community culture (Coyne et al.2006; Reiter et al. 2009). Related to these findings, [...] mothers in this region largely reported receiving formal support from faith-based organizations, typically churches. Due to familiarity and accessibility, participants appeared to feel comfortable in approaching churches or church-sponsored programs that provided such necessities as food and clothing. They expressed more hesitancy in approaching formal agencies and program providers such as the Department of Health and Human Resources, Job and Family Resources, or Community Resources. Their selection of services may be reflective of the treatment they reported receiving when they sought support rather than the organization itself”

Finally, while researching community programs, I found that many of these programs are not publicly advertised. A large portion of the entries in the Eblen Directory of Community Services Handbook & Resource Guide could not be found by the average person doing a simple internet search on resources available to the community. Often, assistance programs are privately funded and spread via word of mouth. As budgets are already tight in Western NC, the cost of advertising these programs makes it difficult to ensure that members of the community to obtain equal access.

Sustainability

One of the main goals of this project is sustainability. It is extremely important to me that The Eblen Directory of Community Services Handbook & Resource Guide be kept up-to-date and accurate as community conditions change. I believe that this project will continue to provide Buncombe County with a valuable service, regardless of the economic climate, if it is maintained. Given the fluid nature of community resources and programs, the guide would be useless if it was not sustained over a long period of time.

The database itself will be available for free to any community member who would like a copy through Eblen Charities. It will be available both in a hard copy and online. A “master copy” in binder form will be stored at Eblen Charities’ Waddell Client Center. This will consist of a collated copy of the database divided into each of the eight categories mentioned above. (Clothing, Domestic Violence, Food, Healthcare, Shelter/Housing, Transportation, Utility, and Special Needs Assistance.) Clients can also obtain individual sheets on any of the aforementioned categories detailing the resources available within these sections at the Waddell Client Center. An online document will also be made available to the public through this project. These measures will be taken to ensure that the database can be easily edited and updated as resources in the area evolve.

The main directory will be maintained by the staff at Eblen Charities in order to continue to be a valuable resource to the community in the future. It is my hope that this project will inspire other individuals to use this project as a map for addressing the gaps between community need and community provisions available in the area.

Conclusion

With the recent economic downturn, some residents have found that they are struggling to meet their family’s needs. For many, community assistance and non-profit programs have proved invaluable to helping them stay afloat during hard times. When I learned that the current accepted standard resource was incomplete, I set out, alongside Eblen Charities, to develop a resource which could be used to guide clients in the right direction- regardless of who they knew or the resources they had access to.

In the course of this project, I discovered just how hard it could be to find the resources a family in crisis would need to maintain basic necessities (such as food, shelter, clothing, and medical care). I spent a large portion of my time with this project simply tracking down programs. While

the current 2-1-1 Directory for Buncombe County is an incredibly valuable resource, it is not complete. Had I been a working mother of three struggling to make ends meet, this search would have proved to be much more difficult.

In the course of this project, I found that there is a need in the area of long-term assistance. While there are a variety of food and clothing assistance programs in the area, there are much fewer heating and rent assistance programs. These programs assist families with their long-term needs. By helping individuals to maintain adequate housing, organizations can provide the building blocks for a better future. When programs such as heat and rent assistance are properly developed and maintained, individuals can focus their attention on taking measures (such as employment and education) which help to ensure they can become self-sufficient.

The housing shortage in the area means that many families which would otherwise be able to meet their needs on their own, fall into crisis and are forced to rely on these emergency programs. There is a demonstrable need in Buncombe County for community service organizations to improve their efforts within housing and long term assistance programs

I believe that this discrepancy is due to a regional hesitancy to fund non-emergency programs. An increase in funding for programs to help families from falling into poverty could result in a decrease of these families requiring emergency assistance- which often costs more and produces less long-term results for individual families.

Personally, I became involved with this project because I was interested in learning more about community resources and how they work. My previous work with nonprofits in the area alongside my studies within my Political Science major inspired me to start this project and the results I have seen since completing it have inspired me to continue working with and learning about non-profit agencies and programs in the area.

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