

MANAGING

Governance and Regulation

New Charity Helps Poor People Get Small Sums Online for Big Needs

By Doug Donovan

A NEW CHICAGO CHARITY is playing Internet matchmaker for small donors and needy people in their communities with an online platform that also helps social-service groups attract new supporters. The new approach is catching on so fast that it has attracted two big foundation grants to spread it to three more cities across the country.

Benevolent was born when Megan Kashner, a former social worker, saw her clients face seemingly minor hurdles—cash for a month’s rent, car repairs, or a licensing test—but end up homeless or unemployed because they couldn’t scrape together what they needed.

“We have all these families falling back from reaching their goals for something that should have cost \$200 to \$500,” says Ms. Kashner, Benevolent’s founder. “And we have all these studies telling us that people want to know what the impact is of their donations.”

Merging 2 Ideas

In February 2011, Ms. Kashner, who earned a business degree in 2003 and progressed into executive roles, decided those two ideas were the roots of a concept that could be combined to help the needy.

While she was still an executive director of three big-city offices of the Taproot Foundation, an organization that mobilizes corporate workers and others to donate their professional skills to nonprofits, she fleshed out the idea to find a way online to connect donors directly with people who need small sums.

By December, a live site was raising money to help people who had been vetted by local social-service groups.

That is the main difference between Benevolent and other sites that raise money for organizations, not individuals. DonorsChoose.org allows donors to contribute to needs posted by public-school classroom teachers. And Kiva connects donors to low-income people requesting loans that they intend to pay back.

Modest Needs in New York is the most similar crowd-giving charity, but it does not partner with nonprofits to vet the needs of individuals. It does that work itself.

A social-service group not only verifies that a person really needs the money requested but also receives a grant from Benevolent to fulfill the need by purchasing it for the client, ensuring the money is spent as donors intended.

Ms. Kashner’s hope was that donors eager to see their money help real people would step up and provide small sums that could make a big difference.

So far, 700 donors from 44 states have provided 1,500 donations averaging about \$50. Benevolent has raised more than \$66,000 to help 131 peo-

The screenshot shows the Benevolent website interface. At the top, it says "Benevolent Make your giving personal. Be part of someone's story today." There are links for "Register" and "Sign in", and a search bar with "Find needs..." and "Search". Below this is a section titled "How it works" with four steps: 1. A person encounters a need... 2. A professional at a nonprofit verifies the need... 3. The need is listed on the Benevolent site so you and others can help... 4. Benevolent sends the funds to the nonprofit, and the need is met! It also says "You get email updates from the person and the nonprofit." Below this is a section titled "Benevolent makes it easy to give directly to help one person when it matters most" with a sub-heading "Individuals with one-time needs post narratives and videos about themselves and their needs. Each of these needs has a correlating validating statement and video posted by a nonprofit professional who knows the person and his or her need." There are four numbered steps: 1. You browse needs (Browse people's needs and stories and commit any amount you wish to the one(s) that touch you.) 2. Nonprofit receives funds (Once a need is fully funded, we send the funds in the form of a grant to the validating nonprofit.) 3. Nonprofit fulfills need (The nonprofit fulfills the need for their client and reports back to us.) 4. You get email updates (Updates are sent to you with notes from the person whose need you supported and from the validators, and sometimes photos of the need fulfilled.) At the bottom, it says "At Benevolent, we focus on the needs of those individuals who face singular challenges as they pursue their goals of work, education and personal sustainability. We partner with the nonprofits who already know those posting needs so that you can be assured that your support is well-targeted and well-managed." There is a "Browse needs" button.



Megan Kashner, a former social worker, founded Benevolent after seeing clients end up homeless or unemployed because they couldn’t scrape together enough money for a licensing test or a car repair.

ple working with 90 nonprofits in 15 states.

“People want to help people whose stories they can relate to,” Ms. Kashner says.

Videos and Essays

Benevolent designed its Web site to make it easy to see the personal stories from vulnerable individuals.

Charity clients supply photos or videos and detailed essays explaining why

The site promises nonprofits that it will highlight their services and staff and expose them to a new network of donors.

they are and why they need the one-time help. Their case workers at social-service groups supplement that information and are responsible for e-mailing feedback to donors on how the money is spent

“It’s been immensely helpful,” says Regan Brewer-Johnson, associate director for programs at the Jane Addams Resource Corporation in Chicago.

The nonprofit trains former prisoners, low-income people, and the homeless the skills they need to get manufacturing jobs.

But the group’s \$1.6-million budget, financed by private and government

grants, does not pay for basic gear like helmets, gloves, and jackets that students must own to land welding jobs, for example. The typical cost for such items: more than \$400.

“It’s a lot of money to come up with when you don’t have a lot of income, you’re unemployed,” Ms. Brewer-Johnson says.

When Ms. Kashner pitched the idea of Benevolent, officials at Jane Addams quickly saw the potential. So far, the group has raised an average of \$491 for each of the 24 students who posted needs. It used the money to purchase safety gear, pay for car repairs, or buy winter clothes for their children.

“It’s been huge for us,” Ms. Brewer-Johnson says.

New Donors for Charities

Benevolent covers its expenses by adding 10.25 percent to the amount it raises for each client. When enough donors pitch in to pay for whatever a client needs, Benevolent sends a grant to the nonprofit that vetted him or her.

Some social-service clients don’t attract enough support; when that happens, Benevolent redirects those gifts to someone else’s need.

The site promises nonprofits that it will highlight their services and staff members and expose them to a new network of donors.

Benevolent has been helped by the attention from a high-powered fan: Jonathan Greenblatt, director of the White

House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation.

“Benevolent is a great example of a venture using an innovative solution to address the challenges facing our nation, especially those faced by the most vulnerable populations,” Mr. Greenblatt says. “Their crowd-funding approach is simple yet highly effective, which is why the rest of the nonprofit community has also taken notice.”

In May, in part because of attention from Mr. Greenblatt and the White House, Benevolent received foundation assistance to place staff members in other cities and start working with local nonprofits.

The Marjorie S. Fisher Fund of the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan awarded Benevolent \$85,000 to build a Detroit presence. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation gave Benevolent a \$200,000 grant to hire representatives in Charlotte, N.C., and Silicon Valley.

‘Moved to Tears’

Benevolent sends frequent e-mails to its donors highlighting compelling stories about people it has helped. One such note relayed an unusual request from a pregnant Chicago woman named Brianna. She needed \$210 to pay off a traffic ticket. If she didn’t pay it, she would lose her baby.

That’s because Brianna is in prison. To be eligible to participate in a pro-

Continued on Page 19

How Donors Can Help the Poor Online With the Help of a Nonprofit

To help people in need describe themselves, Benevolent provides clients a questionnaire to elicit the basics.

I am a mother and need a stroller and other baby supplies for my newborn
 Sierra from Chicago, IL

About Sierra
 I think of myself mostly as a friendly person. I'm a caring and supportive mother. I'm sensitive to my children's needs and want to improve our situation so they can grow up and be successful and... [Read more](#)

My need
 I need a stroller, a bassinet and blankets for my new baby. Right now my biggest challenge is to be able to travel with my newborn and have somewhere safe for her to sleep. Meeting this need will help me because I won't have to worry about meeting all of my family's needs.

My situation
 My current situation is that I

Validated
 This need has been validated by Aimee Dinschel from Inspiration Corporation

Support
 \$25 of \$250
 1 supporter helped so far
 29 days left
 \$25 Support
 Follow this need
 12 0
 Like Tweet

Recent supporters

A graphic provides a quick and regularly updated view of how much is needed, how much has been donated, and how many people have pitched in.

If a client's need doesn't attract at least 95% of the requested money in the allotted time, Benevolent allocates the funds to a client with a similar need and will "notify the donor immediately," its Web site states. Donors have 48 hours to reply if they want their gift allocated differently.

Each client's financial request is verified by a nonprofit before it goes online. When the need is met, Benevolent awards a grant to the nonprofit, which in this case would use it to buy a stroller.

Validated by Aimee Dinschel from Inspiration Corporation (What does this mean?)

About Aimee Dinschel
 My job title is Clinical Services Manager. I have been in this position since July 2013. My work involves providing supportive services to families moving from homelessness into permanent supportive housing. What I like about my job is being able to help the participants in our programs achieve... [Read more](#)

I have known Sierra for about 2 months. Sierra and I met when I began working at Inspiration Corporation in July 2013. I currently conduct home visits with Sierra and her family and assist them in creating and achieving goals.

I think meeting this need is important because it will allow Sierra to care for her newborn daughter.

This will move Sierra's life forward by allowing her to use her family's limited resources on other household needs.

Clicking on the nonprofit's name provides a list of all the charity's employees who have worked with Benevolent to validate needs and all the clients who have received support through the site.

Potential donors can send a message with additional questions directly to the charity employee who did the validation.

Inspiration Corporation
 Visit website

In an atmosphere of dignity and respect, Inspiration Corporation helps people overcome homelessness and poverty to improve their lives and increase self-sufficiency services, employment training and housing. Each year, Inspiration Corporation helps Chicagoans who are characterized by chronic homelessness, unemployment, chronic illness or substance abuse, and social isolation. These individuals all share the same goal: to improve their current situation and toward self-sufficiency.

Validators

Eva
 I am the Resource Specialist for the Employment Project here at Inspiration Corporation. I have been in this position for 8 months and I joined Inspiration Corporation because I was originally a corps member with Avodah. My roommate and close friend was placed here and she came to visit her and... [More](#)

Caesarel
 My name is Caesarel Marsh. I work for Inspiration Corporation at The Living Room Cafe and I have worked here for the past 6 years. I am a front line service provider and case manager in providing supportive services and housing placement assistance. My job as it is to listen to our clients and their needs... [More](#)

Anna
 My job title is Career Specialist. I have been in this position since August of 2012. My work involves assisting participants to improve their lives through employment, education, and directing them to resources that will reduce the stumbling blocks along the way. What I like about my job is... [More](#)

Benevolent features the nonprofit and employee who verified that a client was facing a legitimate financial challenge, not just to assure that the donation request isn't a scam but also to expose donors to the work local nonprofits do.

Charity Acts as Middleman to Verify Recipient's Need and Spend the Funds

Continued from Page 17

gram that allows infants to remain with their mothers behind bars, she could have no outstanding fines.

"Seven donors from five different states took only seven hours to completely fund Brianna's need," Ms. Kashner wrote in an e-mail to donors.

Within days, the ticket was paid and Briana was transferred into the program.

"If it weren't for Benevolent, she wouldn't be with her baby and she wouldn't be bonding with her son right now," says Alexis Mansfield, pro bono director at Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers.

The benefit for her clients is not only financial, Ms. Mansfield says. "They've been moved to tears by the help they've gotten through Benevolent," she

says. "There is something really healing and cathartic about knowing there are people out there who care enough to help."

Ms. Kashner and her small staff worked without pay un-

A Chicago woman needed \$210 to pay off a traffic ticket. If she didn't, she would lose her baby.

til July 2012. They struggled to create and improve the site and formed partnerships with nonprofits by calling people Ms. Kashner had met in her social-service work.

The site's big break came last summer when Ms. Kashner was talking to Paul Schmitz,

chief executive of Public Allies, who served on President Obama's White House Council for Community Solutions. He put Ms. Kashner in touch with Mr. Greenblatt at the White House.

Mr. Greenblatt and Ms. Kashner spoke one day by phone as she was returning from a meeting. He peppered her with questions about Benevolent before inviting her to speak at an exclusive White House-sponsored meeting on philanthropic innovations in Washington.

With microphone in hand, Ms. Kashner delivered a TED-like talk she called "The Power of One." It featured the story of a woman named Christina who needed \$200 to complete her nurse-certification training to get a job.

Ms. Kashner may just as well have been a client on the Benevolent site. Her need was cash to expand her operations. She sold her story just like people on her site do.

And she sold it to just the right audience.

The meeting was closed to the public, but its host, Jean Case, co-founder of the Case Foundation, in Washington, said Ms. Kashner's presentation was one of the meeting's highlights.

Julie Fisher Cummings was at the meeting and was sold on Benevolent right away. She alerted her mother, Marjorie S. Fisher, whose foundation seeks to finance ways for neighbors to help neighbors.

"They like to know who they're helping," Ms. Cummings says.

The grant from her mother's foundation was an easy sell. And now a new Benevolent employee, Andrea Perkins, is in Detroit, reaching out to social-service groups in a city that has just gone bankrupt.

"I definitely think that every community could benefit from a program like this," Ms. Perkins says. "There are a lot of people who want to help. They have the ability to help. They just don't know how to help."

That's what Damian Thorman, national program director at the Knight Foundation, found so appealing about Benevolent—its ability to build local networks.

"It's very important to have it tailored to a specific community," Mr. Thorman said. "We like the fact that it helps citizens help each other."

Girl Scouts Cuts National Staff by 25%, Citing Declining Membership

By Suzanne Perry

Girl Scouts of the USA, plagued by continuing membership losses, has cut its national staff by about one-fourth in recent months, chopping 85 positions through layoffs and voluntary buyouts.

"Like many nonprofits around the country, Girls Scouts of the USA has been facing challenges due to membership declines and economic realities," the organization said in a statement, adding that it was in the midst of "a

familiar with the figures reported so far said membership of girls and adult volunteers fell by more than 5 percent.

Ms. Chávez said in her memo that "merchandise sales"—which includes items like unitary forms—also fell.

The departures follow other turmoil in the Girl Scouts national office since Ms. Chávez arrived in August 2011. At least seven senior managers have left, and employees have sent a continuous flow of anonymous letters to the board complaining about her leadership.

New 'Customer Officer'

The national board has stood by Ms. Chávez, however. Connie Lindsey, the board president and an executive at Northern Trust, told *The Chronicle* last spring that Ms. Chávez was the right person to help transform the Girl Scouts so it would stay relevant.

Ms. Chávez has led an effort to revamp the national office so it becomes more responsive to the needs of councils, scouts, and volunteers.

In May, she hired Daniel Boockvar, a former executive at Weight Watchers International, to serve as the charity's first "chief customer officer."

The organization's financial woes have been exacerbated by rising pension obligations.

The national headquarters told local councils in a memo this summer they might have to increase their pension contributions by 40 percent in 2014, to a total of \$42-million, to help cover the plan's deficit under federal law. It said it would help cushion the blow by providing financial assistance of \$5.9-million.

The youth group is pushing Congress to tweak the pension rules that apply to charities with multiple entities to bring them in line with what it says

are less-onerous obligations that apply to corporate plans.

Meanwhile, it is fighting a lawsuit from a Tennessee council charging that the national office increased the pension's costs by offering generous early-retirement incentives to people who were at risk of losing their jobs when mergers shrank

312 councils to 112. (The Girl Scouts declines to comment on the lawsuit.)

'I Can't Wait to ...'

The theme of the new recruitment campaign is "I can't wait to ..." and one suggested answer is "be the star of my own story." The campaign aims to increase

both young members and adult volunteers through a grassroots effort.

"As a Girl Scout volunteer, you can show girls that anything is possible," the first lady says in her video, "and you can inspire them to dream bigger and go further than they ever imagined."

Employees have sent a continuous flow of anonymous letters to the board complaining about the CEO.

major, multiyear transformation effort" to become more agile.

In a memo to local Girl Scouts councils, Anna-Maria Chávez, the chief executive, said the national office needed to "streamline its work and resources—including staff—to focus on the strategic initiatives that most help councils reach, retain, and serve more girls."

The departures include 40 people who were terminated and 45 who took buyouts offered to those 55 or over with at least 10 years of service. The cuts were made from a staff of 326.

Membership Decline

The Girl Scouts, which started a new recruitment campaign last month with the aid of Michelle Obama, has seen the number of girls who are members drop by 20 percent from 2003 to 2012, to about 2.9 million.

A Girl Scouts spokeswoman said final numbers have not yet been tabulated for the 2013 fiscal year, which ended Monday. But several people who are fa-

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