

# **SEANtracker: Shoals Emergency Assistance Network**

*A model of community agency and church collaboration*

## **Location**

Northern Alabama

## **How did it start?**

Disaster relief brought agencies together  
Communication tool helped them stay together

## **How is it maintained?**

Agencies networking through United Way administration

## **Network Size**

50 Community agencies, churches

## **Key Audiences**

- Existing collaborations or network looking for tools to enhance their work together
- Agencies wishing to form a network or collaboration
- More rural areas looking to connect their services to provide more holistic care
- Coalitions looking for ways to collect data on entire span of care offered in their communities

## **Key Learnings**

- Build a network upon existing relationships, grow it by including others
- A collaborative spirit is foundational and collaborative tools are essential
- Disaster brings people together, but assessment, reflection and refinement can improve and strengthen collaboration for long-term success
- Engage a strong and solid agency to serve as a network administrator

## Big Storm Brings Synergy to the Shoals

When Hurricane Katrina hit a stretch of Alabama coast in 2005, it devastated small coastal shrimping towns like Bayou La Batre and others along Mobile Bay. And while the storm had an immediate and visible affect coastally, many did not see the ripple affect into other communities. This is the story of a community adjusting to the ripple affect and learning from their experience to build a stronger continuum of care for all because of it.

### The Ripple North

Southern Alabama families and entire neighborhoods migrated almost 400 miles north, settling in a metropolitan area in northwestern Alabama called The Shoals. Agencies and churches in the area quickly formed a VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) coalition to provide a continuum of care, response, and recovery for these displaced families. “I worked for 18 months with families relocated to our community,” says



Ashley Butler, of the United Way of Northwest Alabama. In addition to the United Way, the Northwest Alabama VOAD team consisted of American Red Cross, Faith Church, people from the Social Security Administration and many other churches and agencies.

While the Shoals had local community service agencies and churches that could provide assistance to these displaced families, there was a problem. Tina Scott, who served as the Executive Director of United Way of Northwest Alabama at the time says, “We had 330 families and in a short time we were trying to accommodate large numbers of people. We learned that we weren’t getting the same information from some families; that they were getting aid from elsewhere and from us, which, in the end caused resources to dry up faster than they would have if there would have been a way to monitor who received what and the organization they received it from.”

### A collaborative spirit is not enough

While the agencies in Northwest Alabama had a collaborative spirit during this disaster, they lacked an essential collaborative tool to make their efforts extend further. They needed to be able to communicate with one another about the families they were helping—in real time. In a follow-up meeting of the special VOAD team, it was clear that they wanted to continue to work together and improve. “We started analyzing what we could be better next time. Everyone knew everyone and so we started looking at software tools that would help us communicate better about our case management,” says Ashley.

After checking into several system options and finding them either ineffective or too costly, some from the VOAD team and United Way director began working with locals Mike Simon and his team of software and web developers to create a tool specifically to meet their needs. “I don’t even think Mike’s team even knew what this would be when we got started,” laughs Ashley. What was created by was an affordable, easy to use web-based system by which agencies and churches could share their assistance records and information with one another. Ashley simply calls that “synergy!”

While the VOAD team still exists, another team was also started called SEANtracker (Shoals Emergency Assistance Network) and they don’t just work together for major disaster relief, but serve all people in Northwest Alabama through the every-day disasters affecting families. “We started sharing our case management using the online system Mike’s team developed in January 2007 and we now have 50 churches and agencies working together,” says Ashley. That online system developed through the synergy between community agencies and Simon Solutions is called CharityTracker and is now offered to communities all across the United States.

## **About the Shoals**

The Shoals includes the Northwest Alabama cities of Florence, Muscle Shoals, Tuscumbia and Sheffield and the counties of Lauderdale, Colbert and Franklin. It is home to University of North Alabama and has a connection to both a historical and thriving recording industry. Florence is the birthplace of the “Father of the Blues” W.C. Handy as well as legendary record producer Sam Phillips—most notably attributed with the discovery of Elvis Presley. Muscle Shoals is often dubbed the “hit recording capital of the world” and was immortalized in the Lynrd Skynrd song “Sweet Home Alabama.” It’s an interesting history for an area with a population of close to 150,000.

Even before the influx of families from Hurricane Katrina, the Shoals region had its own story of both poverty and profit. Residents of this region work in a variety of industries, many people serving as line workers in manufacturing companies and distribution warehouses. There is also an eclectic tourism component to this area, which is host music and art festivals as well as fishing and golf tournaments.

Because of its mixture of rural and city life, there is a lack of certain services found in many larger cities, such as public transportation. “Without public transportation, everyone has to have a car. In our area, you can’t just walk to your job in most cases. A running vehicle can be a huge expense for people and without one, a cycle of poverty can begin. If your car breaks down, you can’t get to work, then you get fired and can’t pay for car repairs,” says Ashley.

## **SEANtracker today**

There are 50 agencies and churches that make up this coalition, and the SEANtracker group has seen some amazing results to using their CharityTracker shared case management system. “We have seen a large decrease in the duplication of services offered in our area and more people being helped,” says Ashley. In 2008, there were 21,700 case records in their system and agencies are saving both time and money by sharing information.

On a daily basis, agencies and churches use the CharityTracker tool to screen clients, keep thoughtful records, look at trends in people's lives and in their community. CharityTracker is allowing this group of nonprofits and churches to:



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*--Ashley Butler, United Way of Northwest AL*

- **Track the amount of money and assistance given.** “Agencies or churches can input the amount of assistance given. It is a great way of tracking how much an individual is receiving and refer them to budget counseling or job skills training, if necessary,” says Ashley.
- **See reports on all the needs and trends in benevolence.** “I have been surprised at the amount of utility assistance we give as a community,” says Ashley. This information can lead a community to make better decisions about new programs and see the impact changes in their community have on people's economic situations.
- **Share information about their non-profits in the online bulletin board.** “Every Monday morning, The Salvation Army posts how many beds they have available for men and women at their facility. It is a great help to the other agencies in our community to know and refer people accurately,” says Ashley.
- **Work together better to serve people.** Because they communicate intentionally, agencies in SEANtracker are able to operate more effectively, especially for special programs. “We have a Toys for Tots program and the Salvation Army does any Angel Tree at Christmas every year. We used to ask families to only apply for one, but people would end up on the list for both programs. Now, because we share information the number of duplication has gone down and both agencies are helping a lot more families,” notes Ashley.
- **Alert one another of potential fraud or difficult cases.** “We use this feature quite a bit. If someone comes into an assistance office and was ugly, we encourage our users to put out an alert. We don't encourage people to write anything bad about them, but simply alert everyone to the behavior so that everyone stays safe. This alert system also keeps away fraud because people know we will check to see where they have already received assistance, or if they are being honest about their story and situation,” says Ashley.
- **Have a sense of unity.** Ashley especially sees this benefit where the churches are concerned. “The multiple denominations coming together have been such a pleasure to me. If you knew our community before this, you would not have believed that possible,” she says. Ashley also notes that there is a river running through the community. Not only did it physically divide the community, the river was an invisible wall to the span of care available. “Through SEANtracker, that wall is coming down and more sectors of our community are working together,” says Ashley.

## **Beyond Online Communication**

Just communicating with one another via the internet is not the only thing that keeps this network unified. SEANtracker members have quarterly meetings to discuss updates and stress best practices. Ashley laughs and describes herself as the SEANtracker police: “I try to be the center of how we use CharityTracker and stay in touch with the agencies. I watch the way things are put into the system and try to keep the data clean, like not having duplicate cases or misspelled names and words.” Ashley also helps train additional agencies coming on as needed.

Story-telling is also a feature at the quarterly gatherings. “Last month one of our agencies shared a thank you card they received from someone who got a \$10 gas card. In our line of work, people don’t always say thank you and that seemed like such a little thing—except to the person receiving it. Sharing our stories helps keep us going,” says Ashley.

## **Overcoming challenges**

While it seems like this network is strong, Ashley admits that there is still more work to be done. “There are probably 300 more churches that are not a part of this network and 50 of those are larger churches. I feel like we can never know our reach on the community until we have everyone possible involved and we can never change people’s situations without sharing information,” she says.

Why is this so important to her? Good stewardship of resources is something the United Way and Ashley don’t take lightly, especially in their community. Northwest Alabama is made up of a number of manufacturing and line workers from companies like TNT Fireworks and American Wholesale Book (the book distribution center for Books-A-Million). These are the people that participate in fundraisers and give their hard-earned money to support the United Way, their churches and community agencies. “At the United Way, we work really hard to check out our agencies and see that they are good stewards of this money given—a lot of which comes from generous people that only make \$8-10 dollars an hour at their job,” says Ashley.

To encourage agencies to join SEANtracker and use CharityTracker, the United Way asks every one of the agencies they support to use the system and the United Way even covers that cost. “This is not a huge expense for us, but a great thing for the agency,” says Ashley.

Churches, however, join on their own accord and finance it themselves. “We have not seen a resistance to the cost. We normally ask for churches to pay annually for their involvement and they are just fine with it. They know that they will be compensated three times over because of their participation. They are no longer paying bills that don’t need to be paid,” says Ashley.

With all the information and collaboration benefit, why wouldn’t a church use CharityTracker? Ashley says the barrier is a philosophical difference, rather than a practical one: “Some churches, but certainly not all, believe that if God brought the person to them for assistance, they should simply help them. They don’t check references or keep records.”

## **Empowering People to Handle Sensitive Data**

To train agencies and churches on using this online system, United Way collaborated with the local college and the system's creators. "We used the school's computer lab and representative from Simon Solutions was also there. The system is so easy to use, that was one of the directives with Simon Solutions in building the program—and they came through!" says Ashley.

She also provides ongoing training to new member of the network on an as-needed basis now. "Most churches use volunteers to enter data and secretaries work as benevolence connectors. One of our agencies uses all volunteers to enter the data," says Ashley.

All people using the system are not only trained on the functionality of the system, but maintaining the credibility and confidentiality as well. "They are trained not to discuss cases, what information to include and not include as well as how to use the system," she continues. Every agency or church in the network signs a partner agreement, holding everyone to a standard of quality in working together, which includes asking each person looking for assistance to sign a Release of Information (ROI) agreement. "It is really important to us that individuals seeking assistance fill this out and understand how we share their information- for their benefit. We ask people not to enter cases unless they have a signed ROI," she says.

Not all agencies use CharityTracker the same way, though. Some agencies may put several notes, including the amount given to an individual, while others keep certain notes or the amounts given private. "It's simply important to know who is receiving what kind of help where," says Ashley.

## **Faster is better**

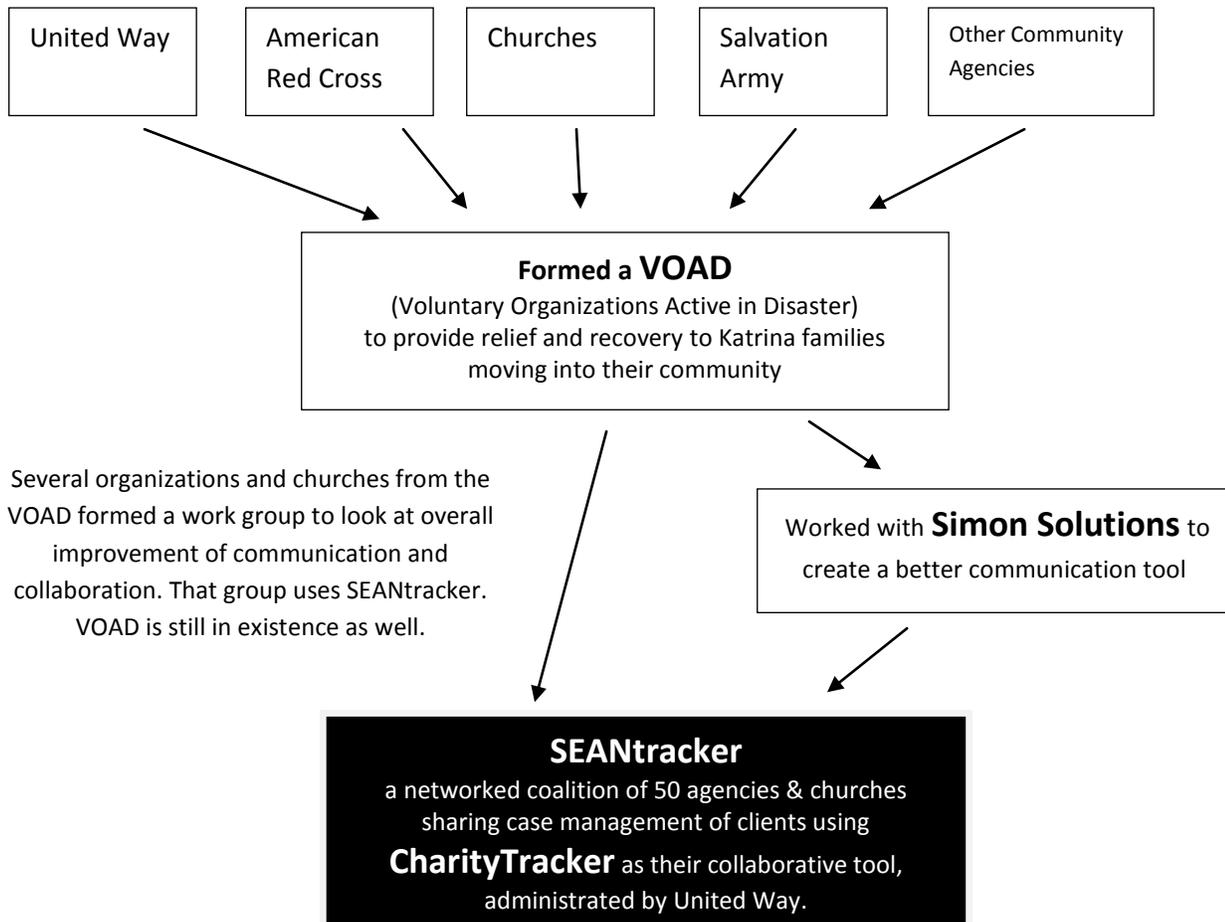
While the synergy and collaboration achieved by these agencies and churches in Northwest Alabama is impressive, the real story is about needs being met. Alerts and bulletins share information immediately with others who care and people with needs get help and have hope. How does that happen in a typical day of using CharityTracker as opposed to their old system?

Before developing SEANtracker and using CharityTracker, an agency would have to make several phone calls and wait for return calls to check out a person's assistance history if they were concerned about fraudulent behavior. Today, agencies know in an instant someone's benevolence history. Before CharityTracker, agencies would turn people away when they did not have enough funding or there was an issue of policy preventing them from helping in a particular case. Today, an agency can send an alert or bulletin and immediately see results, like Sandy's story from the Salvation Army. She sent out the following alert to the rest of the network:

*A 60 year old widower with two developmentally disabled adult sons came to our office looking for assistance with his utility deposit of \$150. He saved enough to be able to move into his house and cover the expenses but was not aware that he would need a deposit to have his utilities connected. Our policy is that we don't help with deposits. Can anyone help? Please contact me for more information.*

Within 45 minutes, agencies and churches responded and the need was not only met, but the response was enough pledges to pay for his utility deposit four times over. The widower was able to have his utilities connected and moved in to his house with his sons that day. "So far I have not known about any bulletin that has been posted that has not been met!" says Ashley.

### This history of SEANtracker (Shoals Emergency Assistance Network)



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