

Digital fails to meet its promise in crisis

An analysis of 75 Silicon Valley websites shows what's missing in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis

June 30, 2020

Services delivery grind to a near halt on the information highway

In the wake of COVID and its economic fallout, people have never needed more help finding resources – housing, ways to pay their utility bills, food banks, mental health and addiction counseling, educational resources, and access to healthcare. COVID-19 has only amplified the challenges governments and their nonprofit partners face in meeting the needs of their residents.

New research conducted by trelyz evaluates the content of 75 social service websites in the Bay Area and looks at what and how much information is available to residents on the websites where they would expect to find help. The sample included the 9 Bay Area county sites, 10 of the largest Bay Area Cities, and 56 nonprofits.

Clearly, times have been tough for those charged with delivering services to the most vulnerable, thanks to factors like shelter in place orders, the reduction of in-person services due to the pandemic, work from home requirements, and the sheer scale of people's unprecedented needs in the wake of mass unemployment. Most people have never lived through a crisis like the one we face today. But shouldn't we expect more from Silicon Valley, the birthplace of the information highway?

Only 35% of social services websites provide information on their Homepage regarding service availability during COVID-19 crisis

Who are you gonna call?

When offices closed, so did many people's access to critical health and human services. Some service providers were able to convert their services to remote delivery, particularly counseling, advice, rent and utilities assistance, and others. But what about food? With unemployment in California already reaching 15%, hundreds of thousands of people in the Bay Area (many of whom have never sought help from government agencies or charities before) are being faced with impossible choices - like choosing between paying rent or a car bill, or eating dinner that night.

Where do most people look for help when they need it? The Internet. That works for people who still have cell phone data or access to wifi. Fortunately, many homeless Californians have phones. But when public resources like libraries and social services offices are closed, how do people find and access free wifi? A quick web search will no doubt bring up websites for nearly any problem a resident faces. But what if the website is missing crucial information such as whether or not it is still offering the services it did pre-COVID? Or what if there is no phone number to call for emergency assistance? And what if, in the middle of the most stressful time in your life, you have to wade through pop-ups asking you to donate, or worse, can't find what you need in Spanish, your native language?

75 social services sites in the Bay Area

Organization	Clear Service Availability in Wake of COVID	Homepage has Hotline or Advice Line	Homepage has General Email	Homepage Focus on Beneficiaries	Homepage Focus on Donations	Website Includes Languages other than English
Full Sample	35%	21%	35%	41%	23%	32%
Nonprofits	41%	25%	41%	36%	30%	23%
Government	16%	11%	16%	58%	0%	58%

Information is a basic human right

There are unprecedented opportunities to access information online. The ability to find timely, relevant help is now critical for basic survival in the Bay Area. Information, like food and shelter, is not a privilege – it is a right. And yet information about where help is available is often needlessly difficult to find. Government and nonprofit service providers have traditionally relied on flyers, binders, call centers, receptionists and case workers sitting in offices to get their message out. But in the absence of these largely in-person tools and in the face of the dramatic increase in the number of people who need help, websites become even more important.

So where did service provider websites come up short?

- Most (65%) of the sites analyzed failed to state what services they were offering during the lockdown
- Only 21% of the full sample had an obvious help or advice line on their Homepage, and only 35% had their email
- Only 23% of nonprofits had content in languages in addition to English, although 27% of Californians are foreign born and 44% speak Spanish; government websites were twice as likely as nonprofits (58%) to offer content in other languages besides English

Finding the shortest path to help – the logistics of care

Government agencies rely on nonprofits to deliver services to the 7.6 million people who live in the Bay Area. Their websites should therefore be focused on their key audience - the residents benefiting from their services. The content most important to those users should be available with the least amount of searching, especially during a crisis.

Information about key services should therefore be visible on the homepage or no more than 1 click away. The equivalent to live inventory management in this sector is providing services with the shortest possible path between the person looking for help and the information they need.

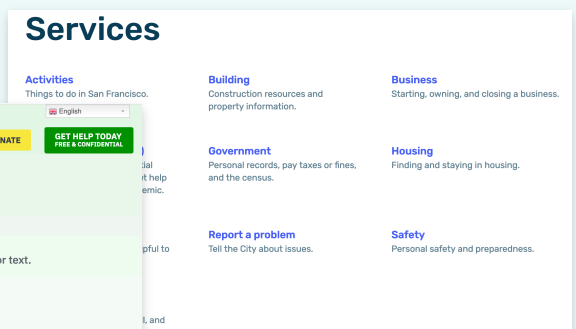
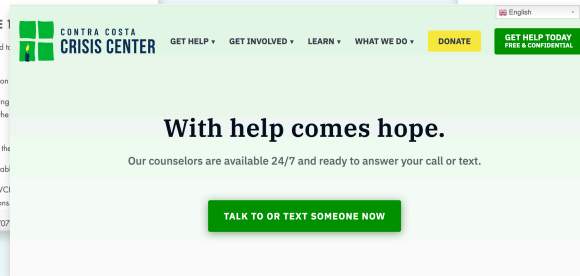
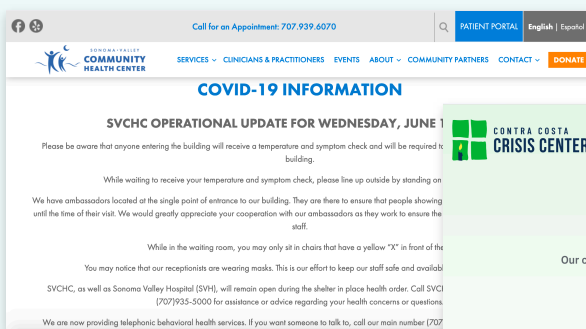
The most important information, especially during a crisis, should be on the home page or no more than 1 click away

- City and county sites tended to have longer paths to key categories of information than nonprofits, with many placing key information as many as 4 clicks away from the homepage. For example, on the City of San Jose website, it takes 4 clicks to get to resources available to homeless families. On Solano County's website, it takes 5 clicks to find mental health services information.
- Almost all nonprofit websites analyzed had appeals for donations on their Home page but only 41% of their Homepages focused on beneficiaries/members of the public; a full 36% of the nonprofit sites focused largely or primarily on donors.

Best Practices

Sonoma Valley Community Health Center shows all current service availability directly on its Home page

City and County of San Francisco shows primary services available to beneficiaries on its Home page



Contra Costa Crisis Center provides access to phone or text help at the top of its Home page

Conclusions

The results for members of the public might be disappointing. But crisis begets opportunity. No longer able to provide live, in-person assistance residents are accustomed to, **service providers must revolutionize how they deliver and promote services to meet the needs of a COVID-19 world**. Government and social service providers of all sizes need to move from an emergency response phase towards a relief and recovery mode. The disruptions and increased need caused by COVID-19 may very well portend permanent changes to our way of life; service providers who respond to the changes now will be better prepared for the future.

The starting point for our research was the assumption that social services websites, whether government or nonprofit, should focus on their primary customer - the resident (or beneficiary). These organizations may have other objectives, but those can only be achieved if the customers' needs are satisfied. Residents seeking help are already stressed enough; **service provider sites should recognize the urgency of their need, and make a hotline or advice number immediately visible on the Homepage**. All service providers would do well to focus their Homepage content on customers, and make content for other stakeholders less prominent.

Nonprofits face a particular challenge in that in order to operate they rely on donations. However, all too many of their websites launch with a popup asking for donations or focus the content of their Homepage on donors. City and County websites, the first place those in crisis tend to look for help during the pandemic, rarely make it clear what services are available at all during COVID and too many of them put the relevant information 1 or more clicks into their sites. **The shortest path to critical information means putting critical services on the Homepage.**

Methodology

Between June 8th and 18th our research team identified 10 of the critical challenges residents are facing now in the wake of COVID (*financial assistance, housing, health, mental health, work, education, homeless, immigrants, violence and abuse, aging, youth and children, and racial equity*), and then found 56 nonprofits meeting some of all of these needs from each of the 9 Bay Area counties 10 largest cities. The nonprofit annual budgets ranged from \$964,427 to \$156,280,069.

Each of the websites were analyzed on the basis of 28 criteria which included: whether there was COVID specific service availability, types of content, categories of services available, the stakeholder focus on the Homepage, the number of clicks to get to key information about services available, and languages available.

Sample

10 Cities: San Jose (pop. 1,021,795), Oakland (433,031), Fremont (241,110), Santa Rosa (176,753), Hayward (159,203), Sunnyvale (152,703), Santa Clara (130,365), Concord (129,295), Vallejo (121,692), Berkeley (121,363)

9 Counties: Santa Clara County (1,938,153), Alameda County (1,663,190), Contra Costa County (1,147,439), San Francisco County (884,363), San Mateo County (771,410), Sonoma County (504,217), Solano County (445,458), Marin County (260,955), Napa County (140,973)

56 Nonprofits: Abode Services, Alameda County Community Food Bank, Bay Area Community Services, Bay Area Legal Aid, Bay Area Rescue Mission, Bill Wilson Center, Boys and Girls Clubs of SF, Bread Project, Brilliant Corners, Call Primrose, Catholic Charities of Santa Clara, Catholic Charities of the East Bay, CityTeam Ministries, Coastside Hope, Contra Costa Crisis Center, Downtown Streets Team, East Oakland Collective, EveryOne Home, First Place for Youth, Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, HomeFirst of Santa Clara, Homeward Bound Of Marin, Hope Services, La Casa De Las Madres, La Clinica, La Familia, Larkin Street Youth Services, LifeMoves, Loaves & Fishes, Martha's Kitchen, Meals on Wheels of Contra Costa, Momentum for Mental Health, Operation Dignity, Opportunity Junction, Pacifica Resource Center, Peninsula Family Service, Petaluma People Services Center, Project Open Hand, Puente de la Costa Sur, Redwood Empire Food Bank, Safe Alternatives To Violent Environments, Salvation Army Golden State Division, Samaritan House, San Francisco-Marin Food Bank, Second Harvest Food Bank, Shanti Project, SHELTER, Inc., Sonoma Valley Community Health Center, St. Vincent de Paul of Alameda, Sunnyvale Community Services, Telegraph Hill Neighborhood Center, Tenderloin Housing Clinic, United Way Bay Area, WeHope, West Valley Community Services, YMCA in SF.

About trelyz

trelyz offers the world's first integrated social service data mapping, communication, and coordination platform for use by the public sector and nonprofits. The LifeSpots mobile app helps the public find services they need, nearest to them, from any service providers when and where they need it – in the palm of their hand.

Anonymized Results from the Full Sample

Organization	Availability of Services during COVID	Categories of High Need Services listed	Homepage Includes Hotline or Advice Line	Homepage Includes Donations	Homepage focuses on Donations	Homepage Includes Volunteers	Homepage focuses on Volunteers	Homepage Included services for Beneficiaries	Homepage focuses on services for Beneficiaries	General Email directly on Home	General phone number directly on Home	Number of clicks it takes to reach a service category	Website includes Languages other than English
1		x		x		x		x	x	x	x	1	
2	x	x		x	x	x		x			x	1	
3	x	x	x	x		x		x		x	x	2	
4	x		x	x		x	x			x	x	1	
5		x		x		x		x				1	x
6				x		x						2	
7		x		x				x	x	x	x	1	
8				x				x	x			1	
9				x	x					x	x	2	
10		x		x		x		x				2	
11		x	x	x		x		x	x		x	0	
12		x		x				x	x	x	x	1	
13				x	x							1	
14	x	x		x				x	x		x	1	
15				x	x	x				x	x	1	
16		x	x	x		x		x	x			1	
17		x	x	x		x		x	x		x	0	x
18	x	x		x		x		x		x	x	1	x
19	x	x	x	x				x		x	x	0	
20	x	x		x	x	x		x				1	
21				x	x	x		x				1	
22		x		x		x		x		x	x	1	
23	x	x		x		x		x		x	x	0	
24	x	x		x		x		x	x	x	x	1	
25	x	x		x		x		x				1	
26	x	x	x	x		x		x		x	x	0	
27	x	x	x	x				x		x	x	1	x
28	x			x		x	x			x	x	1	
29		x		x	x			x			x	1	
30				x		x		x			x	0	
31	x			x	x							1	
32	x	x		x				x	x			1	
33		x						x	x			1	x
34	x			x		x		x				0	
35		x		x		x		x	x			1	
36				x							x	1	
37		x		x	x	x		x		x	x	3	
38	x			x	x	x		x			x		
39				x	x	x						1	
40		x		x				x	x			2	x
41	x	x	x	x				x	x			0	
42	x			x	x					x	x	2	x
43	x		x	x		x					x	1	
44		x		x	x	x		x				1	
45			x	x	x					x	x	0	
46		x		x		x		x	x			0	
47	x	x	x	x	x	x		x			x	0	x
48				x	x	x		x			x	1	x
49		x		x				x				1	x
50		x		x		x		x			x	1	
51		x		x		x		x	x	x	x	1	
52	x	x		x				x	x		x	1	x
53	x		x	x		x		x	x	x	x	1	x
54		x				x		x	x	x	x	1	
55		x		x	x	x		x		x	x	1	x
56		x		x		x		x	x	x	x	1	
Nonprofits	41%	66%	25%	96%	30%	66%	4%	79%	36%	41%	66%		23%

Anonymized Results from the Full Sample

Cities													
Organization	Availability of Services during COVID	Categories of High Need Services listed	Homepage Includes Hotline or Advice Line	Homepage Includes Donations	Homepage focuses on Donations	Homepage Includes Volunteers	Homepage focuses on Volunteers	Homepage included services for Beneficiaries	Homepage focuses on services for Beneficiaries	General Email directly on Home	General phone number directly on Home	Number of clicks it takes to reach a service category	Website includes Languages other than English
57								x	x	x	x	1	x
58		x				x		x	x		x	1	x
59		x						x			x	1	
60										x	x	1	x
61	x							x	x			2	x
62		x		x		x					x	1	x
63												2	
64												2	x
65		x							x			2	x
66		x						x	x			1	
Cities	10%	50%	0%	10%	0%	20%	0%	50%	50%	20%	50%		70%
Counties													
Organization	Availability of Services during COVID	Categories of High Need Services listed	Homepage Includes Hotline or Advice Line	Homepage Includes Donations	Homepage focuses on Donations	Homepage Includes Volunteers	Homepage focuses on Volunteers	Homepage included services for Beneficiaries	Homepage focuses on services for Beneficiaries	General Email directly on Home	General phone number directly on Home	Number of clicks it takes to reach a service category	Website includes Languages other than English
67	x	x						x	x			3	
68		x						x		x		2	x
69		x						x	x			1	
70								x	x			1	
71		x						x	x			1	x
72		x	x	x		x		x	x		x	0	x
73		x				x		x	x			1	
74												1	x
75	x		x									1	
Counties	22%	67%	22%	11%	0%	22%	0%	78%	67%	11%	11%		44%