NYC's Tech Community Lends Culture and Code to Hurricane Sandy Relief Efforts

While Hurricane Sandy has faded from the headlines, the relief effort to help those affected by the storm is still very much in progress. It is a massive endeavor, involving numerous organizations of varying formality, and its sheer size can sometimes get in the way of the efficient dispatching of help.

The inefficiency has frustrated many, including both those helping and those being helped. So, recently, elements of the New York City tech community came together to try to do something about it. Organized by New York Tech Meetup, a number of relief organizations joined with tech developers in a two day conference meant to produce some solutions to the problem. The results were impressive, especially given the time they were developed in, and should be able to help not just the Sandy relief effort, but future disaster responses as well.

A Plea For Better Coordination

As the conference kicked off, it did not take long for the relief organizations in attendance to identify a series of common problems. One after another, representatives of these organizations- which included FEMA, the American Red Cross, United Way, Occupy Wall Street and more- took the stage to talk about where they needed help. A few common themes emerged, but the most critical one identified was the need for better coordination between relief organizations.

Again and again, those on stage and in the audience audience brought up the importance of real time data sharing and efficient supply management. Deficiencies in these areas, it was revealed, have led to wasteful duplication of effort. In one frequently cited example, attendees were told that it was not uncommon for affected residents to be contacted by multiple different relief organizations asking essentially the same questions. “Why is there so much overlap?” asked a baffled Rockaways resident sitting in the crowd.

After these needs had been aired, the attendees split into groups to tackle the problems through tech. A day later, they reconvened, bringing with them usable tools to help relief organizations conduct business more efficiently. Among the tools demoed at the conference's close- some of which were created from scratch, others significantly improved- three stood out from the crowd:

Voluntarily Created specifically to help relief organizations coordinate their door to door operations, Voluntarily centralizes canvassing data and makes it easily accessible to those who need it. Volunteers using the app can download walk lists and, for each home visited, mark the needs discovered. An urgency metric is built in as well, meaning volunteers can quickly note how bad the help is needed for each home.

Coordinators can centrally monitor the results gather by Voluntarily, either on desktop or mobile. The goal, according to the Voluntarily team, is to prevent volunteer overlap and duplicate questioning as well as help relief organizations quickly understand where help is needed and then get it there on time.

Pingo Being unable to contact relatives in affected areas after a disaster hits can be a nightmarish experience. Pingo aims to solve that problem by allowing its users to drop a pin on a map in the location they believe their loved ones to be. Pingo then asks those close by to help. Pins dropped on Pingo are dynamic: They change colors when someone goes from missing to found and can be updated with information such as when the last attempt to contact the person was and whether they are believed to be safe. The creators of Pingo also plan to gamify the platform, giving those who successfully rescue someone special status within the app.

uGov Understanding that volunteers are wasting time trying to figure out which government assistance programs affected households qualify for, the creators of uGov developed an app which gives volunteers a series of questions to ask and then instantly lets them know what programs are available based on the answers inputted..

It's a Culture Thing

This type of activism goes to the very core what a tech entrepreneur is all about, said Jessica Lawrence, New York Tech Meetup's executive director. “This is what a tech entrepreneur is, they are someone who wants to solve the problems of the world and they want to do it in an incredibly efficient way,” she said. “That's what they're used to doing on a daily basis, so when a disaster happens, that's where their mind directly goes.”

Lawrence explained that, from her vantage point, the problems of coordination have been exacerbated by organizational politics. Some, she said, have tried to say one organization was doing it right while other were not. “Instead of pointing fingers and trying to accuse people of either not stepping up or not doing what they should,” she added, “we wanted to take what we have all experienced, the individual stories that we all have, pull that together, figure out where the gaps are and then work together to build solutions to fill those gaps.”

And that's what they did, lending not only their time and code, but a culture that has little tolerance for phrases like “that's just the way things are done around here.” The development of the solutions can only go so far though, as it's now up to the organizations in the field to adopt the new tools and agree to better share information with each other. It will be no easy task, but seems to be one worth the effort.

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