The Computerworld Honors Program

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Final Copy of Case Study

Status:
Laureate

Year:
2013

Organization Name:
Thresholds

Organization URL:
www.thresholds.org

Project Name:
Thresholds' Mobile Technology Initiative

Please select the category in which you are submitting your entry:
Human Services

Please provide an overview of the nominated project. Describe the problem it was intended to solve, the technology or approach used, how it was innovative and any technical or other challenges that had to be overcome for successful implementation and adoption. (In 300 words or less.)

Thresholds' mobile outreach teams connect with thousands of individuals with severe mental illness each year, conducting more than 75% of their outreach, assessments, and interventions out in the community. During engagements, case workers take extensive clinical notes. In years' past, case workers were equipped only with a cell phone and handwritten notes. They had to make multiple trips back to the office to, for example, access a client's medical records, compile client records, and begin working on a client's behalf (i.e., begin the steps for establishing Public Aid, search for housing availability, make appointments for psychiatric or physical care, etc.). The heart of our client services is our electronic medical records, Harmony, which enables clinical and research staff to access a

variety of data on individual members, as well as aggregate reports across members, teams of practioners, or special services, from anywhere throughout the agency. Unfortunately, none of this information was available for use out in the field. Information obtained and submitted at the office wasted approximately two hours of client time daily. Furthermore, given the wayward lifestyles of some of our clients and potential clients, reconnecting with these men and women for follow-up often proved difficult. Many of these potential clients are homeless and struggle with cognitive difficulties and untreated symptoms. Launched in 2009, Thresholds now equips more than 350 case workers with a SafeBook laptop, Air Card, and Verizon Wireless subscription. This technology gives each case worker access to our hard drives, email, Internet, and host of remote applications. The specific objectives of this program are to increase client's time spent out in the field, improve service by allowing both the case worker and client to instantly share a wealth of information, increase records accuracy, preserve client confidentiality, and reduce overall costs.

When was this project implemented or last updated? (Please specify month and year.) Has it incorporated new technologies and/or other innovations since its initial deployment? (In 300 words or less.)

The project was implemented in 2009, starting with Thresholds' Supported Employment Program and then expanding agency-wide. Currently, over half of Thresholds' computing devices are mobile. Thresholds constantly updates equipment - i.e., laptops and Air Cards - to make its case workers more efficient.

If this is a previously submitted project that has been significantly updated and/or expanded, please describe the nature of the update here. (In 300 words or less.)

The Mobile Technology Initiative was a pilot concept that asked the question: How can technology enhance our services? The answers came quickly and have dramatically increased the size and scope of our outreach services and efficacy of services. In short, mobile technology has made us better. As such, more than 300 outreach workers, from departments across our 900-person agency, now contain the laptops to perform their work better. It has made an enormous impact in how we serve our clients and those yet to come.

Is implementation of the project complete? If no, please describe the project's phases and which phase the project is now in. (In 300 words or less.)

Thresholds' Mobile Technology Initiative is ongoing, with improvements to hardware, bandwidth, etc. made on an ongoing basis.

Please provide at least one example of how the technology project has benefited a specific individual or organization. Feel free to include personal quotes from individuals who have directly benefited from the work. (In 300 words or less.)

As the only program of its kind in Illinois, Thresholds' CTA Project has proved successful at engaging an often elusive population of homeless men and women. Unlike traditional homeless outreach programs, which typically reside in a fixed location or established within the city's network of shelters or food pantries, by necessity our program staff are constantly in-transit. Staff connect with clients (and potential clients) throughout a vast network of train stops and stations; our teams of two outreach workers purposely vary their shifts (days and hours), as well as train routes, in order to best access the greatest number of at-risk individuals. Unfortunately, given the wayward lifestyles of our clients and potential clients reconnecting with these men and women for follow-up and/or to continue the relationships often proves difficult. Many of these homeless riders, many of whom struggle with cognitive difficulties and untreated symptoms, are hard to find; most do not appear to favor one train line or another, with prevalence for one time of day or night; they do not have phone numbers for our staff to call and reconnect, no address to seek. Clients often forget pre-arranged meeting times and places; some drop out of sight for good. For example, clients who express interest in obtaining a Birth Certificate in order to access benefits, a housing referral, or an examination at one of our agency clinics, are often difficult to find at a later day to sign necessary paperwork, arrange logistics, and the like. As such, meetings with clients are often left to happenstance. Progress can be slow and sporadic. Perhaps no other Thresholds program appreciated the incorporation of mobile technology than the CTA Project. CTA Project outreach workers have greatly increased client capacity, improved individual service, and saved substantial time.

Would this project be considered an innovation, a best practice or other notable advancement that could be adopted by or tailored for other organizations and uses? If yes, please describe that here. (In 300 words or less.)

The first -- and arguably the greatest -- project impact was the virtual elimination of wasted hours spent commuting to and from the office. Greater time in the field allows staff to devote more time to their work and cover the train lines instead of returning to Thresholds to file reports, return emails, and begin working on clients' behalf. Reconnecting with a client or potential client is often difficult, when many have no phone, address, or established patterns to intervene. However, with renewed technology at their fingertips, staff are now able to do more on a client's behalf at each "meeting." For instance, a client suddenly eager to explore housing options can now sit with an outreach worker as they search housing
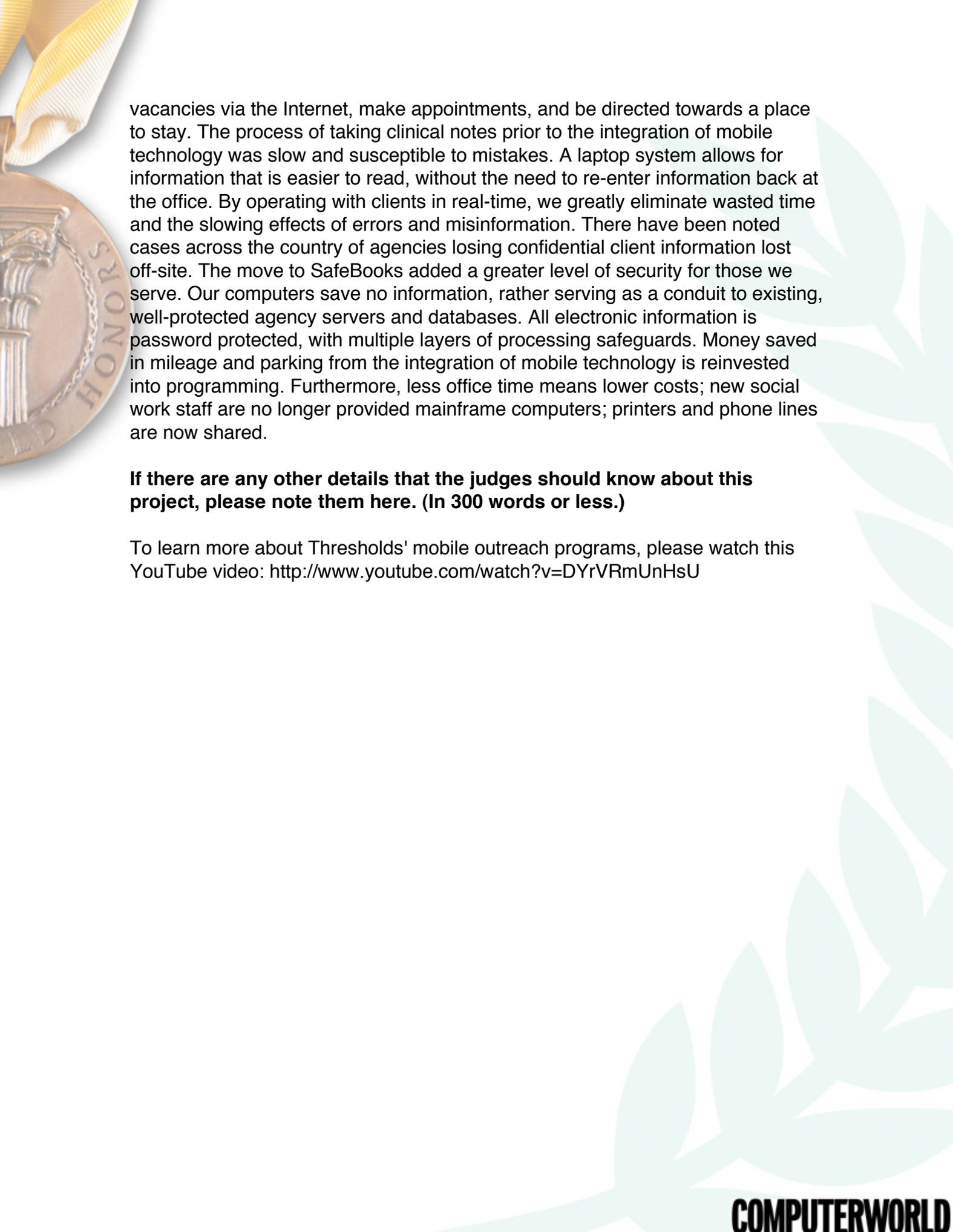
vacancies via the Internet, make appointments, and be directed towards a place to stay. The process of taking clinical notes prior to the integration of mobile technology was slow and susceptible to mistakes. A laptop system allows for information that is easier to read, without the need to re-enter information back at the office. By operating with clients in real-time, we greatly eliminate wasted time and the slowing effects of errors and misinformation. There have been noted cases across the country of agencies losing confidential client information lost off-site. The move to SafeBooks added a greater level of security for those we serve. Our computers save no information, rather serving as a conduit to existing, well-protected agency servers and databases. All electronic information is password protected, with multiple layers of processing safeguards. Money saved in mileage and parking from the integration of mobile technology is reinvested into programming. Furthermore, less office time means lower costs; new social work staff are no longer provided mainframe computers; printers and phone lines are now shared.

If there are any other details that the judges should know about this project, please note them here. (In 300 words or less.)

To learn more about Thresholds' mobile outreach programs, please watch this YouTube video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYrVRmUnHsU