

What's Up: turning local news into information empowerment

in south Wood County, Wisconsin

This paper describes the evolution of the *What's Up* initiative, a collaboration of In courage Community Foundation and MIT Center for Civic Media. *What's Up* provides real-time information about services and events to individuals who are in employment transition.

Written by



MIT CENTER FOR
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incourage
community foundation



Central Wisconsin, like many regions, has suffered the effects of the Great Recession that has devastated the country for over a decade. The changing economy has affected many families, regardless of their income level. People who never sought social services in the past, now need food, guidance and medical assistance provided by government and local agencies. Furthermore, the digital revolution has not served everyone equally. Online portals, and even regular access to computers and the Internet, are often unavailable or not helpful to certain groups such as displaced workers.

Taken in the context above, the *What's Up* initiative entails more than the creation of websites or distribution of computers. *What's Up* is about information-based community empowerment and the manner in which a local community foundation is exploring ways to bring digital information to its region. In courage reinvented itself as a catalyst for grassroots-based community development and is using technology to foster social inclusion - particularly of community members excluded from the digital world.

The sections that follow describe the context in which *What's Up* emerged, introduce key technology features, and conclude with lessons learned. We hope that by sharing our experience we may help other community organizations acquire a better understanding of the role that digital technologies can play in local community development and how implementation of more inclusive, participatory civic initiatives empowers everyone.

Project development timeline

2008 December,
Community Foundation (CF) begins work as a John S.
and James L. Knight Foundation KCIC grantee

2009 Summer,
Digital Divide Survey
(728 residents)

2010
MIT and CF
partnership forms

2010 Summer-Winter,
MIT visits south Wood County -
What's Up project idea born

2011 Early Spring,
In-depth focus groups
and interviews

Background

Located in central Wisconsin, the south Wood County area is a rural community that for nearly a century depended upon Consolidated Papers, Inc., a locally-owned Fortune 500 company, to provide the majority of its jobs and resources. In 2000, Consolidated Papers was acquired by Finland-based Stora Enso. Shortly after acquisition, the company's new owners decided to move much of the company's production out of Wisconsin. As a result of this downsizing, a large portion of south Wood County's population lost their jobs and found themselves without concrete prospects for the future.

As of July, 2012 the south Wood County area, which has a population of 44,778, lost 1,900 residents age 0-29, and 32% of its manufacturing jobs, during the last decade. Its unemployment rate is 8%. The depth of this region's struggle to survive is further illustrated with annual childcare costs at approximately \$6,300 per year, and the number of disadvantaged students at a disproportionate high of 44%. Since 2007, Medicaid claims have increased by 39%, and FoodShare participation has increased by 75%. In addition, 37% of low income families are not connected to the Internet.

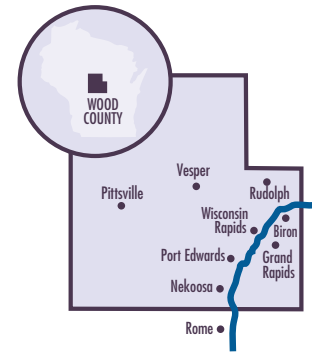
Before the local economic crash in 2000, Incourage (known as Community Foundation of Greater South Wood County until 2012) operated as a traditional philanthropic organization that primarily provided grants and scholarships. When the region's economic base began to disintegrate, Incourage realized it needed to play a more active and visible role in local development.

The foundation shifted its focus from a "community funding" to a "community building" model in 2004, which eventually led the way to a transformative grassroots campaign in 2012 that engaged over 4,100 residents. This approach was made possible with collaborative investment from many local donors, including John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Ford Foundation and National Fund for Workforce Solutions.

In 2008, Incourage was awarded a Knight Community Information Challenge (KCIC) grant. The grant allowed Incourage to begin to assess the local information ecosystem and fund local news and information projects, furthering their community building efforts¹. It also led to a partnership with Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Center for Civic Media (CFCM), a research organization that explores and develops innovative technologies and approaches for local civic engagement and community empowerment. During a series of site visits over the following years, CFCM researchers met with youth, non-profits and educational institutions. Together they explored a variety of information solutions for the south Wood County area, which in turn led to the *What's Up* initiative.

Economic Indicators

from Vital Signs 2.0, July 2012



Population 44,778

- Declined by 1,900 young residents (0-29) since 2000

Manufacturing Jobs

- 32% jobs lost since 2000

Education

- Economically disadvantaged students: 44%

Quality of Life

- Annual childcare costs: \$6,336 (over age 2)
- Medicaid increase: 39% since 2007
- FoodShare increase: 75% since 2007

Access to Information

- 37% of low-income families not connected to the Internet

¹Efforts like Workforce Central and Advanced Leadership Network, see: <http://incouragecf.org/lead/initiatives/>

2012 January 1,
Significant name change becomes reality for Incourage

2012 Summer,
Public launch of the *What's Up* portal and hotline

2011 Summer-Winter,
CF begins transformation to new name: Incourage

2012 January - March,
Incourage conducts largest outreach in history; over 4,100 residents participate in historic grassroots campaign

The original idea: a local news website

When Incurage first applied to the Knight Community Information Challenge, its goal was to compensate for the area's shrinking newspaper circulation by implementing a local news website. However, shortly after receiving the grant, Incurage engaged in a number of exploratory conversations that produced a significant shift in its strategy. In particular, after a Knight Foundation conference presentation by MIT's Center for Civic Media, Incurage became aware of the difficulty the digital divide presents to neighborhoods and towns. Incurage also realized it had much to learn about the information needs of their own community before moving on with an online news platform.

Digital Divide survey

In 2009, Incurage conducted a "digital divide survey" with 728 local residents (2009 Incurage Digital Divide Survey). Of those surveyed in the low-income population, nearly 55% of 18- to 24-year-olds did not have a computer at home. Altogether, 37% of low-income families said they were not connected to the Internet.

This survey also helped to map the community's information ecosystem as a whole, while highlighting gaps of information flow within the agencies and organizations that serve unemployed individuals. Above all, the survey opened the Foundation's eyes to the significant challenges faced by local unemployed residents, inspiring the need for additional research and exploratory conversations with CFCM.

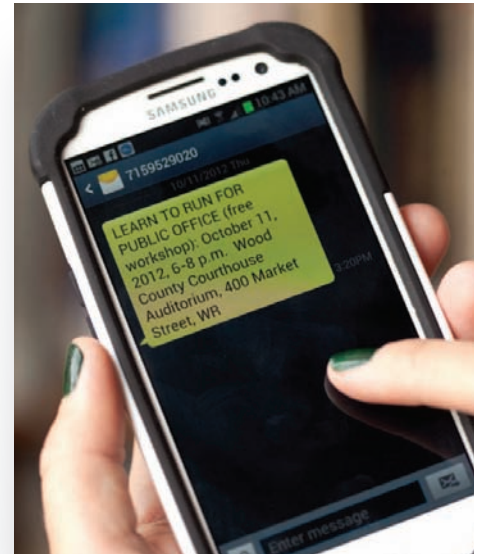
37% of low-income families not connected to the Internet

Focus Group findings

Starting in early 2011, CFCM and Incurage conducted 13 focus groups and numerous individual interviews. Of the main findings, it became clear that although the region already had food pantries, job centers and other agencies that could help families dealing with employment transition, getting the right information to the right people was often a struggle. Residents in the south Wood County area needed better means of accessing information about food, childcare, transportation assistance, and other services that help individuals while in transition between jobs.

Word of mouth is powerful in a small town

According to the participants, "word of mouth is powerful in a small town." So powerful in fact, that it was identified as the most prominent source of local information. Participants also emphasized that, in order to be successful, new communication platforms would have to provide relevant information without requiring changes in personal behavior or access to specific devices. In this sense, there was a strong desire to see service and community event information available via commonly used and free offline channels such as the school's "backpack mail" (information that is sent home with students), the local Buyer's Guide, newsletters, and the radio. Service recipients were also interested in hearing more about other tools for disseminating information such as text message notifications and digital signage at service provider locations. In addition, as noted by one participant, "using the phone is just within my comfort zone." It was that sort of feedback that inspired the implementation of the *What's Up* system.



About the *What's Up* system

What's Up is a software platform that allows people in a small geographic community to share information, plan events and make decisions – using media that is as broadly inclusive as possible. The *What's Up* goal is to get information to people where they are, with or without access to computers and the Internet. Accessibility was one of its most important features because it would not only address the Internet access challenges of low-income and displaced workers, but it could easily be adapted to support ongoing workforce and information-based initiatives led by Incurage.

Keeping accessibility in mind, the platform aggregates data from local community calendars and makes the information available via low cost digital signs placed in public locations, or via other offline media such as paper flyers and posters that can be distributed in local grocery stores, job centers and other key regional locations.

What's Up also generates a simple, yet powerful community hotline that users can call using a mobile phone or land line. Each calendar event that an organization enters into the system automatically receives a unique extension number. By dialing that number, people can hear additional information about the event, receive SMS/text message

reminders, and be redirected to the organization if they have specific questions. *What's Up* can collect statistics about who is calling and when, and then route that information back to local service providers to improve their outreach campaigns.

In theory, using *What's Up* low-cost digital signs, a family that dines free at the "Neighborhood Table" once a week can see upcoming low-cost and free family events displayed above the buffet; a recent graduate can receive text notifications about a job fair; and a person who does not use the web or texting can see important information on the printed newsletters.

Work to-date

To learn from the experience and minimize the risks of adoption, since 2010, MIT and Incentive have been doing a phased rollout of the *What's Up* pilot in central Wisconsin. Each phase involves field experimentation with a new communication channel, an associated impact assessment, and an eventual course correction depending on the findings. Here is a summary of the work to date:

Phase 1 (mid-June thru mid-August 2011): Install an inexpensive digital signage network in places like Walmart, job center, and soup kitchen where service users already gather. The signs show timely information about social service and other location-specific events.

Phase 2 (October thru December 2011): Automatically create and email event calendar content for inclusion in print publications like the Buyer's Guide and school "backpack mail" — publications that user research suggests are well-read by the *What's Up* target audience.

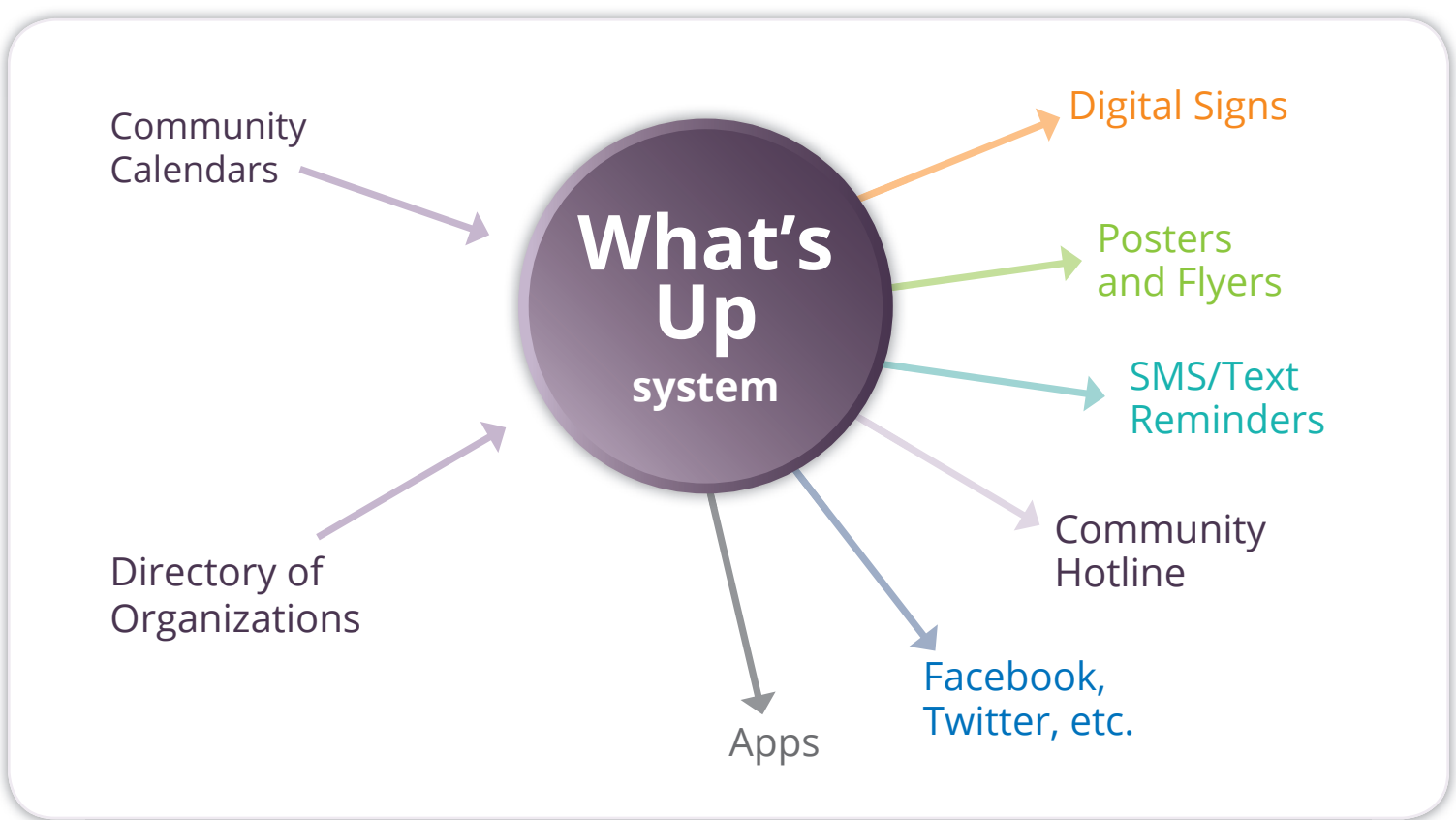
Phase 3 (June 2012 - ongoing): Release the Incentive Events portal, a central community calendar system that can be accessed not just via web, but also via regular phone calls and text messaging.

We foresee *What's Up* evolving through the following phases:

Phase 4: Enhance information support for key community service connectors, (e.g., nonprofit or agency case managers and social workers). These people already play a large, but unsung role in providing information about services to those in need. We aim to extend the *What's Up* system to help keep this group apprised of social service events relevant to the people they share information with.

Phase 5: Add social networking functionality to the *What's Up* system. That might involve extending *What's Up* to support social network services such as Facebook, Twitter and others, but it will be mostly aimed at helping local case workers and community organizations share information with each other and improve the way they communicate with their constituency. Our research suggests that informal, person-to-person networks are an important way people find out about relevant services, and that additional support could make those communication channels even more effective.

Using the phone is just within my comfort zone





The path to information empowerment is not a straight and obvious one.

Lessons learned

The path to information empowerment is neither a straight nor an obvious one. It requires more than distributing computers to local organizations or building new websites and expecting users to come. It involves continual learning by going out to the streets to find out what people need and use in their daily lives. It also involves taking risks and experimenting in partnership with the community to figure out what might work, and not giving up until an appropriate solution is discovered.

1 Experimentation is key

Each phase of the *What's Up* initiative has brought a wide range of technical, logistical, social and cultural challenges that range from finding the best locations for a digital sign, to negotiating ad space in existing newsletters, organizing focus groups, observing clients in a local food pantry and more. Even when the local conditions are right, new technical solutions must often be invented and reinvented multiple times before they live up to their potential. Experimentation was necessary. That was the case with the digital signs, the printed flyers, the phone system and just about everything else involved in the project.

2 Be ready to fail forward and frequently

The best solution is not always high tech. Setting up and maintaining the digital signs for example, required a certain level of digital literacy that was not always available. Organizations that wanted a sign often needed training and ongoing technical support, and the signs themselves need frequent repair. Sometimes, depending on the physical space available or the dynamics of the organization, the digital signs were not as useful as originally anticipated and could easily be replaced by simple flyers or other alternatives that were more effective. In this sense, each phase of the project was piloted and evaluated quickly but intentionally, with the commitment to learn from challenges while stepping forward to the next stage.

3 | High-tech projects need a strong-backbone organization

For the MIT Center for Civic Media, working in south Wood County provided a unique and nourishing environment for the implementation of innovative technologies and approaches for social inclusion and civic empowerment. Above all, *What's Up* helped the researchers develop a new appreciation for community foundations and their potential to affect community change. Community foundations such as Incourage not only helped CFCM researchers understand how a region works, they open doors to local organizations, provide credibility to the project, guarantee the sustainability of the activities beyond the initial pilots, and have pockets of resources that play a critical role when events evolve differently than planned. High-tech projects need a strong backbone organization - a support team that helps mobilize, coordinate, and facilitate the activities within the community.

4 | Backbone organizations need to be grassroots

For Incourage, the work with CFCM confirmed and supported the need to be grassroots-oriented and accessible to local residents. Empowerment does not just happen. It required Incourage to go beyond institutional partnerships, connect face-to-face with individuals - young and old- who receive services, and provide a venue in which residents can truly be heard. Incourage learned they had a pivotal role to play in this high-tech project. One that required their organization to be out in the community in ways they had not been before.

5 | Place-based nonprofits can help

Technology that aims to engage the public needs outreach, especially when answering not only the question, "Will it work?" but also, "Will someone use it?" This is an area in which community foundations—who are tied to place—can help by connecting to local groups and residents. In addition to matching resources and users, Incourage discovered an unanticipated challenge: the amount of staff time spent on technical assistance to local groups. To meet this challenge CFCM and Incourage promptly shifted a portion of their focus from heavy reliance on Incourage staff to improving the platform's usability, while at the same time empowering community users to input/access information at will without a middle-man.

6 | To measure partnership impact, look beyond the project

Measuring true impact, especially in a partnership, goes beyond the project itself. A successful partnership is one in which partners learn from each other with a resulting change in behavior. During the course of the partnership, Incourage reinvented itself. It changed from a perceived "ivory tower," to a catalyst for grassroots-based community development, one that eventually led to a historic grassroots campaign that in early 2012 gave voice to over 4,100 residents of the region. This campaign became one of the largest outreach efforts of the region and captured the vision of the community by the people who live there.

Looking ahead

Although many important lessons have already been learned with the implementation of *What's Up*, we believe that only now, after several years of experimentation, the basic communication processes and infrastructure are in place to support community-wide civic engagement in ways that are more inclusive, participatory and sustainable.

Looking ahead, based upon community feedback, the plan is to continue expanding and refining *What's Up*. Over time, the intention is to develop local capacity to help Incourage become less technologically dependent on CFCM, to continue refining the software platform, and open the initiative for collaboration with other communities beyond south Wood County.

Indeed, given the level of involvement required, the long term success of *What's Up* will depend on the development of a network and connecting similar initiatives in different communities. This paper is an attempt to initiate a discussion around *What's Up* and invite other groups to join the network and share their experiences. Comments and suggestions are welcome!

Grassroots campaign gave voice to over **4,100** residents of the region

What's Up South Wood County

Hotline 715.952.9020

Web incourageevents.org

About MIT Center for Civic Media

Made possible by funding from the Knight Foundation, the MIT Center for Civic Media is a research organization that creates and deploys technical and social tools that fill the information needs of communities. The Center invents new technologies that support and foster civic media and political action; serves as a hub for the study of these technologies; and coordinates community-based test beds both in the United States and internationally.

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About Incourage Community Foundation

Incourage is a leader in rural community development, serving Wisconsin's south Wood County area with programs in workforce development, community information, civility, adaptive leadership, learning, and grant-making. As a three-year Knight Foundation grantee, Incourage builds upon a decade of work focused on shifting community culture and rebuilding the local economy.

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Other Resources

Kubis, Lisa. "Information Needs Assessment – Knight Community Information Challenge Focus Group Report," March 2011.

Newberry, Jon. "Bridging the Digital Divide to Improve Life in Central Wisconsin," February 2010. incouragecf.org > learn > resources

Notes: MIT Site Visit and Focus Group Summary, March 2011.

Report: "Vital Signs 2.0, Measuring the Vitality of the South Wood County Area," July 2012. incouragecf.org > learn > resources

What's Up is made possible by: John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to test new ways of delivering information to increase access for all.

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