New app helping Venezuelans find scarce items

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Harried Venezuelans who devote hours scouring supermarkets for increasingly scarce food basics and toilet paper have just received some digital help thanks to a young software developer.

A free application for mobile devices written by Jose Augusto Montiel lets people notify one another where flour, sugar, milk, cooking oil and toilet paper are for sale. It has been downloaded more than 12,000 times.

The app, known as Abasteceme, or Supply Me, is Android-based and relies on Google Maps for geolocation. It leverages what is known in the tech world as crowdsourcing, with users notifying one another where a certain product is for sale.

Basic items such as wheat flour and butter have gone missing on store shelves throughout Venezuela. Economists blame government-imposed price controls, while President Nicolas Maduro says greedy merchants are hoarding goods.

"From what I've seen so far it's mostly toilet paper, followed by flour," Montiel said about what gets posted most.

The 21-year-old chemical engineering student in the western city of Maracaibo said most of Abasteceme's users were in Caracas when he first made the app available on the Google Play website on May 29.

"But now it has spread all over the country," he said.

He said it's been overwhelming keeping the server that hosts the application from crashing and attending to users, who he says are clamoring for him to include more products.

"People are asking for chicken, butter and soap above all," he said.

Montiel said he also deletes a lot of entries when people notify him that supplies of a certain product have sold out.

The program is designed to automatically erase notifications in two hours, he said.

Montiel said he has no help beyond his sister, who assists with the program's aesthetics.

"I'm also working to develop it for the Blackberry as a lot of people have them in Venezuela," he said.

He said he wants to work on an [iPhone](link) version but can't afford a Mac to do that. He said he's earning just enough to cover costs.

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