

Homeless? This startup has an app for that

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Chris Sun was trying to persuade homeless people to accept free money, which, in this case, was harder than it seemed.

As people lined up for lunch at the Millionair Club in the Belltown neighborhood, Sun asked if anyone had heard of the Samaritan app. Some were apprehensive, so Sun explained: It's a cashless way to give directly to [homeless people](#), via a [smartphone app](#).

"Can I get one, man?" a man in line said. Yeah, Sun said, and held up a Bluetooth-enabled "beacon" for the man to wear.

"And it labels me as a hobo?" the man asked.

Startup culture is about solving problems. In Samaritan's case, the problem is that in Seattle most people want to help with the city's unprecedented homeless crisis but they don't know how.

Samaritan isn't the only social venture with that mission, but if it's going to grow, it will need to team with the nonprofits that have been working against homelessness for decades. Samaritan is a for-profit, at least for now, and its relationship with nonprofits has been strained at times.

Here's how it works. Download the app, enable your phone's Bluetooth, and if you pass by a homeless person with a Samaritan beacon, the app notifies you. Read their story and choose to donate to them.

Donations can be redeemed at participating restaurants and stores,

including Safeway, but not for alcohol.

Even though beacons are preloaded with \$10, some homeless people will not accept one. Some think it's going to track them and give their info to the government. In fact, the company did initially collect location data, but stopped in March because it didn't see the benefit, founder Jonathan Kumar said.

Privacy experts who reviewed the app did not find significant concerns beyond the risks posed by a normal smartphone app.

Other homeless people have used the beacons but let them expire because they are required to meet with staff at a nonprofit partner like Millionair Club every 30 days. If they don't, they can't access the money.

Samaritan, launched in September 2016, has 7,000 downloads in Seattle, and Kumar says donations total around \$2,500 a month. The company has a small staff funded in part by angel investors and a grant from Vulcan. The company makes money off a small sliding fee on top of the donation, as high as 7.5 percent.

Samaritan isn't alone in this tech space. Seattle's startup culture also spawned WeCount, a web app that allows donors to give items rather than money to homeless people.

Although donations given through these apps are important for the companies' success, both are hoping the real solutions will come from getting the public and homeless people more connected.

High-tech manifestation

Kumar, a Christian, sees his app as more than just a way to give money—it is a high-tech manifestation of the Bible's Good Samaritan.

"If you read the story of the Good Samaritan, it's so much more about stepping into someone's mess," Kumar said. "It's all about going and treating someone's wounds, and giving your to-do list and your transportation and your time, not just your money."

That's what happened for Michael McCollugh, who left West Baltimore to get away from drugs and violence. But he could not work in Seattle because of disabilities—liver damage and the loss of his spleen and gallbladder—caused by a car accident years ago. He was homeless on the streets of Seattle for 501 days, until two months ago.

"It was the longest year and a half of my damn life," said McCollugh, 44. "I wouldn't wish being homeless on my worst enemy."

While staying at a shelter in Queen Anne, McCollugh saw someone wearing a beacon around his neck. McCollugh tracked Kumar down and got one himself. Kumar introduced McCollugh to Rob Snow, one of the startup's interns at the time, who became McCollugh's real-life Good Samaritan.

McCollugh has received about \$500 from Samaritan users, but the breakthrough came from Snow. McCollugh had trouble finding a landlord willing to take his state-funded rental voucher. Snow helped out, taking McCollugh around to check out apartments; two months ago they found a place in Shoreline.

This is the highest calling Kumar can think of for the app: making real-life connections. Nineteen other people have gotten into housing with help from Samaritan app users, the company said.

But there's another value in these type of apps—the required 30-day check-in at nonprofits like the Millionair Club. These relationships are a reason Angele Leaptrot, the Millionair Club's senior program director,

said the app is "the smartest thing I've seen in a long time."

"If there's a beacon in this building, I can pull (Samaritan) up and see what this person needs," Leaptrot said. If it says on someone's profile that they're looking for work, Leaptrot can say, "That's what we do here."

And if someone is coming through a nonprofit's doors regularly once a month, that person is more likely to move into housing.

"There's that old saying: You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink," said Graham Pruss, co-founder of the web app WeCount. "But if you lead that horse to water again and again and again, they'll probably drink."

Some hesitation

Not all nonprofits have jumped at the opportunity to join Samaritan.

Union Gospel Mission is one Samaritan partner that already sees more than 500 people a day throughout King County, said Terry Pallas, chief program officer at UGM.

Staff members don't always have time to sit down with beacon-holders to update or renew their beacons, and Pallas said some beacon-holders can get confrontational. UGM is trying to hire staff specifically to work with beacon-holders, but if it can't, the partnership probably won't continue, Pallas said.

"I think the worst part of my job is working with nonprofits," said Kumar. "There seems to be a fair amount of territorialism here ... It's like, 'Whoa, what are you doing ... - you're getting donors to donate directly to these people? ... You might be siphoning off some of our

funding."

Kumar said he will change this approach if he expands, as planned, to more cities such as New York and Austin, Texas. He is finding nonprofits that want to introduce the app themselves—insiders who will be allies, instead of it being "this hotshot, tech-bro crew from Seattle," Kumar said.

Whether or not this is a solution to homelessness remains to be seen, but curiosity surrounds the app. At the Millionair Club, Nadia Karavan was getting her first beacon. Katherine Brown, a grad student and volunteer, put it around Karavan's neck.

"Wow," Karavan said.

"Yeah," Brown said. "It's, like, the future."

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