Project Applecart

A Preliminary Proposal for a Low-Cost Mobile Community Resource Hub

I. Organizational Overview

FreeSource is a St. Louis-based non-profit peer support and resource referral organization that was founded two years ago with the goal of empowering individuals to build and maintain community-based resource connections to enhance all areas of their lives.

FreeSource strives to ensure that each person who works with us is met where they are (in terms of both physical geography and life circumstance), and aims to establish community-based supports that foster the ability of every person who works with us to overcome personal obstacles and experience success and joy as they perceive it.

II. Project Background

While recently moving segments of an IT infrastructure from one building to another, FreeSource board vice president Nathan Patton and FreeSource founder Ben Cohen happened upon an ancient and disused metal A/V cart (the type stereotypically employed by schools to ferry overhead projectors from classroom to classroom). Finding it to be of sound condition, they began to ponder how it might be repurposed for modern use. Ben immediately thought of using it as a combination coffee/tool cart for upcoming Tech Support Café events, envisioning a ramshackle version of interfloor coffee carts prevalent in large office buildings of yore.

It was only later that he remembered previously taking part in several outdoor homeless outreach events, at which he attempted to set up makeshift cell phone-charging and mobile printing stations powered by an old decommissioned uninterruptible power supply. Originally designed to provide emergency power to a server during an outage for 45 minutes, the UPS was still capable of fully charging multiple cell phones and powering a small portable printer for a number of hours, even with a somewhat spent battery. The cumbersome nature of the UPS made it difficult to carry, but affixing it to the A/V cart would potentially allow it to be transported with ease, essentially creating a ramshackle mobile charging station that could traverse a fair amount of distance before depletion.

Though many individuals experiencing homelessness have access to cell phones, it can be difficult to find a reliable means of keeping them charged. Likewise, mobile data and free

and accessible WiFi can also be hard to come by. In the same vein as the UPS, would it also be possible to integrate an inexpensive mobile hotspot (or multiple hotspots) into the A/V cart to create a resource hub through which people could charge their devices, check in with friends and family, access pertinent local resource data, and more?

III. Random Questions and Thoughts

- What if we also used the cart to actually bring people free coffee and healthy homemade snacks (central components of our existing Tech Support Café program) in an attempt to augment basic nutritional needs of individuals accessing the hub, as well as foster a friendly, casual, and accessible atmosphere?

- What if we used any additional room available on the cart to store different sorts of modules (i.e. plastic totes filled with different types of supplies) that could be swapped out based on scheduled programming or anticipated needs? Perhaps one module could contain tools designed for cell phone/gadget maintenance, one could contain stationery meant to help organize important life documents, one could contain art supplies for personal enrichment, etc.

- What if we added a GPS tracker to the cart ostensibly as a theft-deterrent, but also as a means of compiling analytics? We could use such a device in concert with other data points to determine where along our routes the hub was most accessed and share that information with other organizations that conduct outreach.

- What if we adapted techniques pioneered by Shine in Portland, OR to make our hub solar powered?

- What sort of license(s) would be required to operate the cart? Are there loopholes that could conceivably allow us to fly under the radar, as it were?

- How can we best work to make this project easily duplicable and inexpensive to maintain? How easy is it to acquire ostensibly spent means of conveyance (e.g. A/V carts, shopping carts, etc.) and sources of power? Can we use all off-the-shelf parts that are easy to swap out as needed?