

Where the Helpers Get Help

In a closet-sized office tucked away in a Brighton Beach basement sits the heart of New York City, in the form of a small woman named Bella. Her door is open, admitting a constant stream of visitors. Most are elderly or disabled. They come desperate, hungry or evicted. She doesn't let them go till she knows they will be fed, housed and cared for. When they leave her office it's not only with assurances of food, a roof over their head or medical care, it's with the knowledge that they may not have a soul left in the world to care for them, but this compassionate woman will make sure they are ok. In the face of constant budget crisis and growing responsibility, the wisdom and dedication of Bella and hundreds of thousands of nonprofit professionals like her, keep this city vibrant and healthy.

However, because of continuous pressure and demands, Bella and her colleagues don't have the time to create or strengthen necessary professional relationships that could enhance their work. Most nonprofit professionals mingle at meetings and events and have a few agencies they work closely with, but beyond that there are few opportunities for networking. In addition to providing social support, a strong network of nonprofit professionals could ensure enhanced access to resources and information and create a powerful pool of knowledge.

The NonProfit HelpDesk, the foremost technology provider for New York City nonprofits, recognized the need to support the communication and connection of nonprofit professionals and set out to develop a solution. "We are constantly struck by both the wisdom and isolation of the thousands of nonprofit professionals our agency serves," said Chaya Abelsky, director of the NonProfit HelpDesk. "We thought, why not turn to the internet and create a place for these people to connect?" The internet is host to many forums and resources, but there is no one place dedicated to the New York nonprofit professional.

The NonProfit HelpDesk approached Pat Swaan of the New York Community Trust with the idea of creating this online community where professionals could discuss issues, get questions answered, network with colleagues and give each other support. "New York Community Trust is dedicated to empowering nonprofits," said Ms. Swaan. "With their expertise and long history of commitment to New York City's nonprofits, the NonProfit HelpDesk was the ideal vehicle to address this need". The New York Community Trust pledged a generous grant to support the project, and PUZZLE, a unique virtual peer community was born.

On PUZZLE, nonprofit professionals will be able to create descriptive profiles that include their area of interest, responsibilities, and funding sources. Members can search for other members who share a funder, service area or location. The forum area will have sections for discussion of General Operations, Funding, Technology and Policy. Members can browse discussions for information or start new discussions using PUZZLE's simple and easy to use format. PUZZLE also has a Celebration area, where members can post their successes and share their inspiration.

Angela, a Case Manager in the Bronx might visit PUZZLE to ask if anybody can recommend a work readiness resource for ex-offenders. Barry, a Job Developer in Queens visiting the site might see the question and know of a just such a program. Angela and Barry might have briefly met a few years ago at a conference, and their

conversation on PUZZLE would strengthen their relationship. Simon, an Executive Director of the Coney Island homeless shelter, who is feeling overwhelmed and emotionally burnout by his responsibilities and challenges, would visit PUZZLE's Celebration section to view images and descriptions of what inspires other members of the PUZZLE network. He might find images of calming natural beauty, tips for distressing or inspiring sayings. In Celebration, Simon could post one of his own recent successes, gaining recognition for his hard work, and revitalizing his energy.

Although the site will contain a wide breadth and depth of information, it is organized and designed in away to be accessible to users with even only basic internet familiarity. The NonProfit HelpDesk will also be offering assistance in creating profiles and using the site. PUZZLE scheduled to go live this winter. To join the PUZZLE core users group please contact Leah Vincent, NonProfit HelpDesk Director of Development, at l.vincent@jccgci.org.