



The Huntsville Story

Connecting Nearly 400 Organizations
to Build a Community-Wide Care Network

*A Case Study on Connected Communities
and Connected Infrastructure*

The Huntsville Story: A Connected Community

Executive Summary

Across America, communities face the same difficult challenge. Hundreds of churches, nonprofits, businesses, healthcare providers, schools, government agencies, and volunteers are working hard every day—but often they are working independently.

The result is predictable:

- Services are duplicated.
- Critical needs go unmet.
- Organizations compete instead of collaborate.
- Clients repeat their stories over and over.
- Funders struggle to measure real community impact.

Huntsville, Alabama, decided to approach the problem differently. Rather than asking "**How can one organization do more?**" They asked, "**How can the entire community work together?**"

Today, nearly **400 organizations** participate in Huntsville's connected care network through Community Connections and CharityTracker, creating one of the largest collaborative care networks in the country.

This transformation did not happen overnight. It required visionary leadership, dedicated backbone support, trusted relationships, shared technology, and a long-term commitment to collaboration. This case study draws directly from interviews with the leaders who helped make it happen.

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Those interviewed:

- **Tommy Battle** — Mayor, City of Huntsville, Alabama
 - **Jennie Robinson** — Council President, District 3, City of Huntsville, Alabama
 - **Scott Erwin** — Manager, Community Development, City of Huntsville, Alabama
 - **Ann Kvach** — Vice President of Community Impact, Community Foundation of Greater Huntsville
 - **Missy Hanks** — Executive Director, The ELM Foundation
 - **Cathy Larsen** — Program Director, The ELM Foundation
 - **Traci Harris** — Case Manager, The ELM Foundation
 - **Lynne Berry** — The Episcopal Church of the Nativity and Planned Giving Officer, Huntsville Hospital
 - **Kermit Elliott** — Director, Catholic Center of Concern
 - **MariBeth Morgan** — Manager, Digital Experience Solutions, Adtran
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The Challenge

Every interview described essentially the same problem.

- Organizations genuinely cared.
- People wanted to help.
- Resources existed.
- But everyone worked separately.

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Mayor Tommy Battle described the problem as organizations unintentionally duplicating services while other important needs remained unmet. Jennie Robinson explained that agencies often stayed in "crisis mode," leaving little opportunity to address the underlying causes of poverty.

Lynne Berry shared a simple example. When different groups independently served Huntsville's homeless population, some individuals received multiple coats and blankets, while others lacked food because no one knew what others were providing.

Maribeth Morgan from ADTRAN described the same issue from a business perspective. Without coordination, nonprofits unknowingly duplicated utility, food, and rent assistance. Better information sharing meant clients received more complete, long-term help instead of fragmented assistance.

Every interview reinforced one conclusion: **The community did not lack compassion.** It lacked coordination.

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A New Vision

Instead of building another nonprofit...

Instead of creating another program...

Instead of funding another isolated initiative...

Community leaders envisioned something much larger.

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The goal became creating an entire community infrastructure where organizations could work together continuously.

Jennie Robinson recalled that after a community discussion about homelessness revealed more than 130 organizations working independently, it became clear that the problem was not a lack of services—it was a lack of coordination.

That realization eventually led to the creation of Community Connections and the adoption of CharityTracker as the shared platform.

Missy Hanks explained that the original grant awarded to the ELM Foundation was specifically intended to unite the nonprofit community, leading to the development of Community Connections and CharityTracker as the communication backbone.

The vision shifted from helping organizations individually to building a connected ecosystem.

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Step 1 — Establish a Backbone Organization

One of the strongest themes across all interviews was that collaboration requires leadership. Someone must wake up every day thinking about the network.

In Huntsville, that role belongs to the ELM Foundation.

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Missy Hanks explained that maintaining Community Connections, supporting agencies, providing training, recruiting new partners, coordinating meetings, and sustaining momentum became a full-time responsibility—not a side project.

Cathy Larsen reinforced this point. She noted that many communities assign CharityTracker administration to someone with many other responsibilities.

Huntsville instead invested in dedicated network support, allowing her to visit agencies, understand their workflows, customize implementations, provide training, and remain available whenever organizations need assistance.

Without backbone leadership, technology alone would never have created the network.

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Step 2 — Build Trust Before Technology

Technology was never the starting point. Relationships were. Community Connections became the monthly gathering where organizations learned about each other's work.

Traci Harris described these meetings as places where nonprofits, churches, government agencies, and helping organizations gather around a single topic, introduce themselves, exchange resources, and build relationships that continue long after the meetings end. She noted that conversations often continue in the parking lot because people discover new opportunities to collaborate.

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Jennie Robinson explained that these face-to-face meetings were intentionally paired with CharityTracker. Digital collaboration alone was insufficient. People first needed to know—and trust—one another.

Technology strengthened relationships that had already begun in person.

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Step 3 — Create Shared Infrastructure

Once trust developed, CharityTracker became the community's shared operating system.

Organizations could now:

- coordinate assistance
- send referrals
- share resources
- communicate in real time
- reduce duplication
- document outcomes
- collaborate around clients

Rather than replacing organizations' missions, CharityTracker connected them. Scott Erwin described the platform as creating accountability, enabling case conferencing, documenting outcomes, and allowing organizations to move individuals from crisis toward independent living.

Lynne Berry noted that clients enter the system once, reducing duplication while helping funders ensure resources are coordinated effectively.

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Step 4 — Engage Every Sector

Another defining characteristic of Huntsville's success is that the network extends beyond nonprofits. Every interview emphasized cross-sector participation.

The network intentionally involves:

- churches
- nonprofits
- businesses
- city government
- healthcare
- foundations
- donors
- schools
- community organizations

Mayor Battle described city government's role as creating an environment where experts can thrive through collaboration rather than attempting to solve every problem directly.

Scott Erwin explained that the City of Huntsville funds the community license, supports training, encourages participation, and uses CharityTracker to document outcomes and improve accountability.

Maribeth Morgan explained that businesses contribute much more than money. They contribute strategic thinking, expertise, technology, and community leadership.

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Step 5 — Use Data to Drive Better Decisions

Multiple interviewees emphasized that data transforms how communities allocate resources. Instead of asking: "**How many people did we help?**" Huntsville increasingly asks: "**What changed?**"

Scott Erwin described using CharityTracker reporting to evaluate programs, identify root causes, document outcomes, and demonstrate accountability for taxpayer funding.

Jennie Robinson explained how mapping community services quickly exposed gaps—such as inadequate prescription medication assistance—allowing funders and agencies to redirect resources where they were most needed.

Rather than relying on assumptions, leaders could now make decisions using community-wide information.

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Step 6 — Help Organizations Change Their Mindset

One of the greatest obstacles was not technology. It was culture. Many organizations initially feared collaboration. Some worried about losing control. Others resisted changing long-standing processes.

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Cathy Larsen explained that many agencies believed they had to keep using their existing systems until they saw how CharityTracker simplified their work and reduced administrative burdens.

Missy Hanks similarly described overcoming concerns about privacy, process changes, and documentation while helping agencies recognize the benefits of collaborative care.

Over time, success stories replaced skepticism.

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Step 7 — Focus on Transformation, Not Transactions

Perhaps the most profound lesson from every interview is the shift in philosophy. Helping someone once is important. Helping them move toward stability is transformational.

Jennie Robinson repeatedly emphasized asking, **"What can I do so you don't need me anymore?"**

Instead of simply writing another check, organizations began identifying root causes, coordinating interventions, and helping people progress toward long-term independence.

Missy Hanks echoed this vision by describing CharityTracker as a tool that enables communities not merely to relieve poverty, but to measure positive outcomes and help people experience freedom from poverty.

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Results

Although the work continues, the interviews point to several measurable achievements:

- Nearly **400 participating organizations** across the community.
 - One of the largest CharityTracker networks in the country.
 - Strong collaboration among churches, nonprofits, businesses, foundations, and city government.
 - Community-wide meetings that regularly bring together 80–100 leaders to build relationships and share resources.
 - A city-funded community license with coordinated training and technical support.
 - Increased ability to identify service gaps, coordinate care, reduce duplication, and document outcomes for funders.
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Lessons for Other Communities

Huntsville's experience suggests seven transferable principles:

1. **Start with a shared vision**, not just a software platform.
2. **Invest in backbone leadership** dedicated to sustaining collaboration.
3. **Build trust through regular face-to-face gatherings.**
4. **Connect every sector**, including government, churches, nonprofits, businesses, and funders.
5. **Use shared data** to guide decisions and demonstrate impact.

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6. **Support organizations through change** with ongoing training and technical assistance.
 7. **Measure transformation**, not merely transactions.
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Conclusion

Huntsville did not build a stronger community simply by adding more programs. It built a stronger community by **connecting people who were already serving it**.

Community Connections created the relationships. CharityTracker created the shared infrastructure. The ELM Foundation provided backbone leadership. City leaders supplied vision and credibility.

Businesses, churches, nonprofits, healthcare providers, and funders each contributed their unique strengths.

The result is not merely a larger network—it is a community that has learned to work together.

Huntsville's story demonstrates that lasting community transformation begins when organizations move beyond isolated efforts and embrace a shared vision, trusted relationships, connected infrastructure, and collective action.