



CONNECTED COMMUNITY CASE STUDY

The Charleston Story

How Cathy Easley Helped Turn Separate Efforts Into One Connected Community

Berkeley • Charleston • Dorchester Counties, South Carolina

Charleston's connected-community story is ultimately a story about leadership, relationships, and a different vision for helping people. At the center of that story is Cathy Easley of Trident United Way, who helped convene community partners around a simple but powerful idea: organizations can accomplish more for people when they know one another, share information, and work together.

"It can change your community. It can change how you work together."
— Cathy Easley, Trident United Way

404	892	204,075	\$26 Million+
networked agencies	caregivers	people served	assistance recorded

Cathy Easley Saw a Community Working Hard — But Too Often Working Apart

Cathy's story begins with a problem that exists in communities across America. Charleston had many caring organizations and people willing to help. Churches, nonprofits, food pantries, faith-based organizations, United Way programs, and other community partners were serving families every day.

But the organizations were busy doing their own work. Cathy described them as fairly siloed—not because they did not care about collaboration, but because they were working “fast and furiously” to respond to immediate needs.

That created a culture in which a person could go from place to place and receive help with bills without anyone necessarily stopping to ask the deeper question: Why is this person unable to pay the bill in the first place?

At the same time, basic-needs funding could disappear within only a few days. Organizations did not always know what other agencies were providing, where resources were available, or whether a household had already received assistance elsewhere.

“We knew that people needed to work together.”

— Cathy Easley

The Question That Changed the Direction

Rather than asking every organization to simply work harder, Trident United Way's Safety Net Impact Council brought people together and asked a more strategic question:

What does the community need?

According to Cathy, community partners' answers were remarkably practical. They wanted a system everyone could use—simple, affordable, and able to produce good reports.

That search led Charleston to CharityTracker.

Chuck Coward, who served on the Safety Net Impact Council, helped identify Simon Solutions. Cathy and others traveled to Alabama, spent several days learning and testing the system, and returned with the tools needed to begin implementing it in Charleston.

The network launched in 2010 with approximately 40 agencies and faith-based organizations. By Cathy's 2024 interview, it had grown to about 352 participating organizations. Now there are **404 agencies** and **approximately 900 caregivers**.

“It just has been an amazing journey, and it has helped people work together.”

— Cathy Easley

Cathy’s Vision Was Bigger Than Preventing Duplication

It would be easy to describe CharityTracker simply as a way to keep two organizations from paying the same bill. Cathy’s testimony makes clear that Charleston’s vision grew far beyond that.

She wanted organizations to know what one another were doing, understand the resources already available in the community, and use those connections to help people move toward success and financial stability.

For Cathy, meeting an immediate need is often where the relationship begins—not where it ends.

If someone needs food, the community should provide food. If a utility is about to be disconnected, the immediate crisis matters. But once that crisis is stabilized, Cathy’s approach asks another question: What is the next step?

“Sometimes it just needs to start with building a relationship with someone and helping them move from step to step to step.”

— Cathy Easley

From Basic Needs to Financial Stability

Cathy describes Charleston’s work as a continuum. People may enter the community care network because they need food, rent, utilities, or other essential assistance. Those immediate needs must be addressed first.

But the goal is to help the person continue moving.

Step 1 — Address Basic Needs

Food, utilities, housing, and other urgent needs create the opportunity to build trust and stabilize the immediate situation.

Step 2 — Strengthen Basic Skills

Once the crisis is addressed, partners can connect people to GED preparation, training, education, case management, and other resources that strengthen employability and life skills.

Step 3 — Increase Income

Better skills can lead to employment or advancement. Cathy used the example of a person who may already be working but needs additional skills to move from an entry-level position into management or another higher-paying opportunity.

Step 4 — Build Savings

Even a small emergency reserve can keep an unexpected expense—such as tires for a vehicle—from pushing a family back into crisis.

CharityTracker supports this continuum by helping caregivers understand where a person has been, what services have already been provided, what barriers remain, and which community partner may be best equipped to help with the next step.

“How many people...can we help move from needing basic needs to moving to financial stability?”

— Cathy Easley

No One Organization Has to Be Everything

One of the strongest ideas in Cathy’s testimony is that no single organization can meet every need. That is not a weakness; it is the reason a connected community matters.

A food pantry may be excellent at meeting an urgent food need. Another organization may provide job training. Another may provide adult education. Another may help with healthcare, transportation, financial coaching, or housing.

The power comes when those strengths come together in one pathway.

Cathy’s financial-stability framework—sometimes described visually as the “Caterpillar”—shows how different organizations can contribute at different stages. CharityTracker provides the connecting infrastructure that helps caregivers know what has already happened and where the person may need to go next.

Every organization contributes something important along the journey.

Connection Becomes Part of Everyday Care

Cathy's vision shows in how Charleston-area caregivers now describe their work.

Angelina Williams described AmeriCorps members gathering a client's story, recording assistance, uploading documents, and sharing information with partner sites. Instead of asking a person to carry paperwork from one organization to another, the information can travel through the connected system.

Latoya Lewis described being able to see whether a person has been served before and what assistance has already been provided. That helps staff listen for additional needs and avoid repeating work.

Torie Brame described direct referrals between partners. Because relationships and trust already exist, organizations can sometimes rely on another agency's assessment rather than forcing the person to restart the entire process.

These are not separate technology features. Together, they reflect the culture Cathy and the Safety Net partners were trying to create: a community where caregivers can work as a team around the person.

Cathy Saw Data as a Community Resource

As the CharityTracker network grew, Cathy also saw the value of shared data. Before a connected system, some organizations used spreadsheets, while some food pantries literally used tick marks to count bags of food.

With hundreds of organizations participating, manually collecting separate reports for a community-wide picture would be nearly impossible. Cathy explained that, as administrator, she can run reports for the entire community, by ZIP code, by an individual office, or for specific programs.

During COVID, Trident United Way compared 2-1-1 data showing what people were requesting with CharityTracker data showing how people were actually being served. Cathy said the patterns were almost always aligned.

That turns data into more than reporting. It becomes a tool for understanding whether community resources are reaching the needs people are actually experiencing.

At the time represented in the interviews, the network reported approximately 168,000 clients in CharityTracker, more than one million assistance records, and more than \$20 million in recorded assistance.

“I cannot imagine having to collect reports from 352 agencies in order to do a community report.”

— Cathy Easley

Connection Matters Even More Across a Large, Diverse Region

The Tri-County area includes urban neighborhoods, suburban communities, and rural areas where transportation itself can become a barrier to care.

Cathy described one rural area approximately 27 miles from the nearest grocery store. In some communities, people may pay significant amounts simply to reach a food pantry or other service.

A connected network helps caregivers think differently about referrals. It is not enough to know that a service exists somewhere in the region. The service has to be realistic for the person to reach.

CharityTracker helps partners see which organizations provide a needed service and where those organizations are located. Cathy also emphasized the human side of coordination: sending the referral, calling the receiving agency, explaining the need, and helping reduce stress for a person already facing a difficult situation.

Cathy’s Vision in Action: The Sewing Machine

One of Cathy’s favorite stories from the early network captures the entire idea in a few minutes. A woman in the community supported her family by sewing. She was self-sufficient and was not relying on public benefits. Then her sewing machine stopped working.

She could not afford another one, so she walked to a local agency for help. The agency posted a bulletin to the CharityTracker network.

Within Five Minutes

Five agencies had offered a sewing machine.

The agency picked up one of the machines, and the woman was back at work the next day.

No new program was created. No organization had to solve the problem alone. The resource already existed somewhere in the community. The network simply made the need visible and allowed the community to respond.

“It’s just such a great example of how it can work.”

— **Cathy Easley**

Ryan Vrba: Cathy’s Community Vision Becomes Measurable Outcomes

Ryan Vrba’s testimony from Our Lady of Mercy Community Outreach Services shows what Cathy’s connected-community vision can look like inside an individual organization.

Our Lady of Mercy provides wraparound care across emergency needs, wellness, education, employment, food, clothing, financial assistance, and other services. Ryan explained that the organization’s use of CharityTracker evolved from basic service and grant reporting into deeper outcomes work.

Social workers now establish goals with clients and track action steps. Monthly and annual reports show how many goals were established, how many were achieved, and which areas receive the most attention.

The organization also developed a “roadmap to self-sufficiency” assessment that can compare where a person begins with where that person is six or twelve months later.

That directly reinforces Cathy’s larger vision: the goal is not merely to document what was given to a person. It is to see whether the person is moving forward.

“It’s showing us now and allowing us to show our impact, which is really important.”

— **Ryan Vrba, Our Lady of Mercy Community Outreach Services**

Stephanie M. Kelley: Cathy’s Vision Becomes Credible Community Impact

Stephanie M. Kelley’s testimony from East Cooper Community Outreach—ECCO—provides another view of the same community transformation.

ECCO began as an emergency response after Hurricane Hugo and evolved into a long-term organization serving families experiencing financial distress. Its services include food, medical and dental care, prescription assistance, clothing, rent and utility assistance, and other forms of support.

Stephanie explained that good intentions were no longer enough. ECCO wanted to show donors, funders, and the community that its services were making a real difference.

CharityTracker lets ECCO bring information from multiple service areas into one place, understand how many services a household uses, examine gaps, and provide accurate reports to funders.

Stephanie also described the shift occurring among funders—from asking primarily how many people were served to asking how those services changed people’s lives.

ECCO is now incorporating outcome questions directly into its CharityTracker workflow. That means the same system that records services can also help the organization understand impact.

“We’re trying not just to measure how many people do we serve, but...how do our services actually make a difference in your life.”

— Stephanie M. Kelley, East Cooper Community Outreach

The Bigger Story: Cathy Helped Create the Conditions for Collaboration

Ryan and Stephanie’s stories matter because they show what happens when community-wide infrastructure supports strong local organizations.

Cathy did not ask organizations to give up their identities or missions. Each organization continues doing what it does best. The difference is that those organizations can now operate inside a larger network of relationships, shared information, referrals, resources, and data.

That is what turns separate good work into coordinated community impact.

What Other Communities Can Learn from Cathy Easley and Charleston

Begin by listening to the community. Charleston’s network grew from asking partners what they needed, not from imposing a predetermined solution.

Build relationships before expecting collaboration. Organizations work together more effectively when they know one another and understand each other’s strengths.

Choose technology that serves the relationships. The community wanted a shared system that was simple, affordable, and useful for reporting.

Make the network useful every day. Referrals, client histories, documents, bulletins, resources, and reporting make collaboration practical.

Do not stop at the immediate need. Cathy’s financial-stability framework asks what the next step should be after addressing the crisis.

Let every organization contribute its strength. No single agency has to be all things to all people when the community is connected.

Use data to learn, not merely report. Shared data can reveal needs, service patterns, gaps, and outcomes.

Measure whether people are moving forward. Ryan Vrba and Stephanie Kelley show how organizations can connect services to goals, outcomes, self-sufficiency, and measurable impact.

THE CHARLESTON STORY

Hundreds of Organizations.

One Connected Community.

Charleston’s story demonstrates what can happen when someone helps a community see beyond individual programs and separate efforts.

Cathy Easley and Trident United Way helped create a place where organizations could build relationships, share information, coordinate care, understand community needs, and work toward a common goal.

The technology matters. The data matters. The referrals matter.

But Cathy’s testimony points to something even more important: connection helps people move forward.

“It can change your community. It can change how you work together.”

— Cathy Easley

Source note: This case study is based on the supplied Charleston interview transcripts. Cathy Easley serves as the primary narrative voice, with testimony from Ryan Vrba, Stephanie M. Kelley, and other Charleston-area caregivers illustrating the community-wide vision in practice. Metrics reflect the interview period and are not presented as current 2026 totals.