

A Voice for the Voiceless

By Chris Palmer

A Bahá'í-sponsored program of providing voicemail boxes for homeless people seeking employment and housing now serves thousands of individuals and families in eight counties of the San Francisco Bay area. Dramatizing the unity and capacity of local Bahá'í institutions before an astonished social service community, a network of ten Spiritual Assemblies provides an uninterrupted blanket of coverage over a 4,000 square mile area. During a recent 6-month period, 650 homeless individuals used the program to obtain either a job or housing.

“Voicemail for Homeless People” provides homeless clients with a way to receive private recorded telephone messages, using a personal voicemail box at a local telephone number. They can record a greeting to callers using their own voice, and can access their password-protected messages at any time from any phone. The sponsoring Bahá'í communities, most of them quite small, have been able to help hundreds of primarily homeless individuals. Shelter workers have commented on the positive impact upon residents' self-esteem. Comments include “I feel like a human being again” and “I can't believe someone cares enough to help us in this way.”

The program originated during Ayyám-i-Há 1994, when the Bahá'ís of Danville served dinner at the local homeless shelter and stayed to share in dining and fellowship with the residents. Deeply moved by the experience, the Spiritual Assembly consulted for many sessions on what a small community with few resources could do to aid the homeless in a meaningful way. It turned out that one aspect of homelessness is the obstacle of inaccessibility: without a phone number, an individual has no opportunity to receive offers of work and housing. Five years later, the fruits of that consultation have evolved into “Voicemail for Homeless People”, with ten Spiritual Assemblies managing the project locally in eight counties. Together, they processed over 28,000 calls during the month of March.

This free service is offered through existing social service agencies under a contract that protects client confidentiality and shields the Bahá'ís from liability. The Spiritual Assemblies rely on professional caseworkers at the agencies to screen clients, limiting the risk both of illegal activity and of the service being used just to make it more comfortable to remain homeless.

The scope of service grew during the first three years, from removing the obstacle of inaccessibility for homeless people seeking employment and housing, to serving women fleeing domestic violence by providing them a way to receive private messages without revealing their location. Today, the program serves a variety of individuals at risk due to inaccessibility. The program's over 60 contracting agencies now include county Welfare-to-Work programs, the Red Cross, and Catholic Charities, among others.

“Voicemail for Homeless People” is made possible through a generous donation of hardware and software by APEX Voice Communications. Initially, APEX provided the components to transform a UNIX computer into a machine that would provide 100,000 voicemail boxes in Contra Costa County. As the program expanded, APEX contributed a total of eleven such packages, for ten live on-site systems and an eleventh backup system.

In 1997, the Martinez Bahá'í community graciously accepted stewardship of the program in Contra Costa County, with the benefit that its more central location provided local service to more of the

county's concentrations of homelessness. In consultation with Auxiliary Board members Marsha Gilpatrick and Farhad Sabetan, the Spiritual Assembly of Danville also decided to assess interest in expanding the program to other counties. The city of Napa Bahá'ís responded with enthusiasm and set up a program for Napa County. The spiritual forces released through this unified effort of three Spiritual Assemblies and the Auxiliary Board opened many doors in rapid succession.

By October of that year, the Danville Spiritual Assembly was approached by a Bay Area-wide consortium of social service agencies (the "Bay Area Homeless Alliance", widely known by its acronym "BAHA") and asked to expand the program throughout the Bay Area. In close cooperation with its beloved Auxiliary Board Members, the Spiritual Assembly contacted Bahá'í communities in seven target areas in five counties and presented the program to them. A model was developed for systematic implementation of voicemail machines, contracts, and outreach. Within 18 months, Spiritual Assemblies in Geyserville (Sonoma County Supervisory District 4), Oakland, Petaluma, San Carlos, San Rafael, San Leandro, and Vacaville had brought systems online and established relationships within the social services community.

The program uses technology to bring the program within the reach of smaller Bahá'í communities by eliminating needless effort and expense. Two Bahá'í community members - a System Operator and an External Affairs Officer - each devote about four hours a month to system management and outreach to the agencies. In order to keep program expenses to Spiritual Assemblies down to an initial investment in equipment, the social service agencies pay the phone bill for the phone lines that connect to the voicemail system (about \$80 per month per county for four incoming lines, no matter how many voicemail boxes are used). In some cases, financing was provided by loans from individual Bahá'ís so that the Spiritual Assemblies could comfortably pay off the initial investment.

An interesting problem arose in the development of this program. While standardization of technology and contracts was essential to maintain a manageable program, no Spiritual Assembly had jurisdiction over the others. In consultation between the Danville Spiritual Assembly and Auxiliary Board Members, a solution was found: a contract was developed, under which Danville functioned as the Convener, and the communities actually running the program in their counties functioned as Sponsors. Both Conveners and Sponsors have particular responsibilities with respect to one another, but none have authority over the others. In the same manner, a point person from Danville coordinates the effort, but does so in a support capacity.

This program commands immediate attention from local governments and social service agencies, in that the Bahá'ís do not accept payment for this valuable service. Moreover, the unity of purpose required to set up such a network over such a wide geographical area had proven impossible among well-meaning counties with conflicting agendas, and equally well-meaning agencies who must compete with each other for funding. In fact, the Bahá'í Administrative Order, by providing an organizational framework for the program, has enabled an unprecedented cooperative effort between the federally funded BAHA, with over 60 local governmental and private non-profit agencies, and private industry, as well as a cooperative initiative involving the institutions of the Rulers and of the Learned, through which the blessings of Bahá'u'lláh have flowed unceasingly to this effort.

In writing about the program, the Contra Costa Times observed that "for the Bahá'ís, being of service to humanity is their form of worship." The San Francisco Chronicle wrote that "it's a way for people to do what they need to do without being stigmatized." In the Marin-based Pacific Sun,

the program was the lead item in a column entitled “Heroes.” Many other newspapers, as well as several radio and television stations, have covered the story.

Earlier this year, based on the work done at the existing sites, the Bahá’ís of San Francisco received a request from the Mayor’s Office to implement the program in that city. Based on the experience of nine other communities to date, and under the sponsorship of the Spiritual Assembly in San Francisco, the program was up and running in San Francisco within a few months after the original request. With this last site in the current phase of expansion in place, the program had proved its ease of replicability.

As of this writing, the Spiritual Assembly is preparing to transfer its role as Convener for this program to a non-profit “Bahá’í-inspired” agency, which will enable the program to obtain outside funding to hire a fulltime coordinator, in order to explore possibilities for further refinement of services and the practicality of making the program available in other Bahá’í communities. Ongoing consultations with the Regional Bahá’í Council for the Western States will help to shape both this new agency and the handoff.

Letting Deeds Be Their Adorning

by Walt Boyd,

System Operator, Voicemail for the Homeless in Northern Sonoma County

Excitement stirred members of the northern Sonoma County Bahá’í communities as we gathered in Windsor at the home of James Hesson to hear about something new and promising from the Danville Bahá’ís. A diverse group, ranging in age from the 30s towards the younger end of the 80s, our communities have expended considerable effort over the years to hold groups and Assemblies together and at the same time to teach the Cause among the rapidly growing population of the North Bay, 90 miles north of San Francisco. The room was abuzz with anticipation.

Our visitor had dropped a hint that the meeting would have something to do with voicemail, but of the group perhaps only two or three were aware that this new word and concept had something to do with computers. We learned quickly that a number of other Bahá’í communities in the Bay Area were adopting a social and economic development program that would be of considerable interest to county government and independent social services agencies: Voicemail for Homeless People.

To some of us, the presentation was electrifying; to others there was an apparent disbelief in the feasibility of what was laid before us. The questions came thick and fast, many with a tinge of “impossible!” and “what’s in it for our communities?” And even if someone would take on this responsibility, how could we afford it and still keep up our commitments to the National Fund? This was so new to us, so completely, so unexpectedly; so all-encompassing in scope, and yet so pregnant with possibilities for benefit to the homeless and to the Faith in this area of California, that most of us went home that night with alternating exhilaration and despair as our companions.

In the days that followed, someone volunteered to host the system. Another volunteered to act as liaison to the agencies. And the Spiritual Assembly of Sonoma County Supervisory District Four accepted sponsorship. The upfront financial outlay was just barely within the means of the community, but by some miracle the needed funds appeared in the treasurer's report at the following Assembly meeting. What more confirmation could be needed?

The enterprise did not launch swimmingly, nor without setbacks and detours. To begin, the voicemail system would be settled into a house that was at the far end of a dead-end country road, outside even a village boundary. It was not for us to wonder why the telephone company dragged its heels when presented with requirements for new lines. However, constant, patient pressure for service over 18 months finally succeeded in moving the giant utility, and the system went fully on-line.

But the problems did not end with the installation of the voicemail system. The agencies themselves wondered, when commercial enterprises were offering similar voicemail services at substantial expense, how could an obscure religion give away such service for free? Could the volunteers be trusted with confidentiality of client messages? What was in it for them? Who were the Bahá'ís, and could they be depended upon over the long term? These and many other questions were heard. Yet, these difficulties proved providential as the patience and resourcefulness of the Bahá'ís through the frustrating process of implementation in a remote area were noted by the social service community. In the end, their observations of the Bahá'ís in action, the thoroughness and professionalism of the contractual arrangements that were laid before them, and the reputation of the Bahá'ís with this program in other areas allowed signatures to be obtained on contracts and the trek to begin toward extended proof that indeed, the Bahá'ís would be trustworthy partners.

The Bahá'ís of Northern Sonoma County are embarked now and for the foreseeable future in a social program of expanding dimensions, a challenge of major proportions to the individuals and to the Assembly. We are no longer in obscurity in our own front yard, but rather we are becoming known for the very principles on which our beloved Faith stands, demonstrated through service in action. Is it not written, "Let deeds, not words, be your adorning!"?