

PROJECT LIFE-LINK

**Communications System
for
Homeless People
in the
Denver Metro Area**

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Background Assumptions

At any given time in Denver there are approximately 10,000 homeless people. Perhaps even more surprising is that many of these are families with children. Not all are homeless on the streets. Many stay with friends or in cheap hotels. However, all are "transient" and thus relevant to this project.

Obviously they face many challenges, not least of which is survival in Denver's harsh winter climate. There are many (but not enough) organizations that provide shelter. There are organizations that provide food, clothing and other essentials. Indeed, there are many "helping hands" that are available to solve various problems that homeless people face everyday.

However, one problem that has not been tackled is communications systems. Homeless people do not have telephone service. Maintaining a mobile telephone service is impossible for reasons of cost, recharging capability and many other issues.

This telecom isolation makes it particularly difficult to stay in touch with friends, family members, case workers and to communicate with potential employers without disclosing that they are homeless, staying in a shelter or even with friends. This is a significant negative in finding a job.

It is this one aspect of the "homeless problem" that Multi-Link may be able to solve.

A Possible Solution.

Multi-Link Communications is a voice messaging service provider with facilities located in downtown Denver. Multi-Link has a base of small business customers, 25 employees and has been in business for over a decade.

Multi-Link maintains a "state of the art" voice-messaging switch within which are resident some 30,000 different "Direct Inward Dial" or "DID" telephone numbers.

All numbers are local 303 area codes and, when dialed, they ring to an automated voice mailbox within Multi-Link's system.

When dialing one of Multi-Link's numbers, callers hear one or two ring tones, and then a message recorded in the mailbox owner's voice. The sequence of sounds is virtually indistinguishable from a call to a normal house that is forwarded to voice mail when nobody answers.

The owner of the mailbox can record a greeting apologizing for not being there and promising to return the call as soon as possible.

Making the call to the Multi-Link voice mail number to leave the message is free in the local Denver calling area, and only incurs long-distance charges if called from outside the Denver Metro area.

Each mailbox can store many messages for an extended period.

So it's fairly easy to see how people get messages into the voice mailbox, but how does the homeless person retrieve the messages? Since they do not have access to a telephone the most likely solution is payphones. However, they probably don't have \$0.35 to put into a payphone each time they want to check messages!

By employing the current 800 number technology, it is possible to make message retrieval available free of charge from any payphone or local phone. The homeless person would simply pick up any phone or payphone, dial a central access 800 number, then enter his DID number. He would then be able to hear any messages left for him and to take action on job related things or just to stay in touch with case workers, friends and family.

Instinctively I believe that this service has value and can be a significant step in helping homeless people get back on their feet. The idea has been proven in other cities. There is a central organization called Community Voice Mail that promotes such a service. You can find out more at www.cvm.org if you choose to do so.

Required Resources, Costs and Expenses.

- ❑ As our contribution of this project we will dedicate the \$50,000 of voice mail hardware and system capacity required to provide this service and provide all the employee support to distribute the numbers and oversee the project.
- ❑ A single T1 into the system should be able to carry all the traffic for the Life-Link service for up to 10,000 people initially. The monthly cost of the T1 is approximately \$900.
- ❑ The cost of 10,000 DID numbers is approximately \$1,400 per month.
- ❑ To allow our customers to access the mailboxes from any payphone will cost approximately 3 cents per minute and we estimate about 250,000 minutes each month would be required for a total cost of \$7,500 per month.

An annual budget of approximately \$120,000 is required to be raised.

Nigel Alexander and the staff of Multi-Link are committed to raising the necessary funding to provide this service.

Distribution of Numbers.

Once funding for the project is in place, how do we make the DID numbers available to people who need them?

We will enlist the assistance of the people who interface with the homeless everyday to promote the service. This will be primarily the homeless shelter operators and Denver social services.

The City of Denver is anxious to assist with this project and will facilitate distribution through its network. (Please see their letter of support [here](#))

Opportunity for Abuse

There really isn't much opportunity for people to abuse the system or to use it in ways we have not foreseen. We have been providing a similar service on a smaller basis to a shelter called "Urban Peak" for some years without problems. If anybody needs to leave a message for one of our homeless customers, we encourage that. There is no opportunity to connect live calls through the voice mailbox, or to otherwise create a large amount of use. People will tend to use the mailbox exactly as we intend. We will monitor the mailboxes for excessive usage and may restrict usage in abusive situations.

Maintenance.

We will monitor mailboxes periodically and any that are not being used for a month, will be reset and reallocated.

Conclusion.

This note describes in outline the project we are working on.

Thank you for reading it and getting back to Nigel Alexander with your thoughts and comments.