



A CASE STUDY BY BONTERRA PROGRAM MANAGEMENT (FORMERLY SOCIAL SOLUTIONS)

The leading cloud software provider for the social good sector

Connected Communities uses data to take a human-centered approach to affordable housing



Connected Communities is a national leader in affordable and mixed-income housing-based supportive services, working with local, regional, state, and national service partners to help create lasting change in communities around the country.

They function as the social impact arm of WinnCompanies, one of the nation's largest operators and developers of affordable, mixed income, and market-rate housing.

Supportive housing is a highly effective strategy that combines affordable, safe, and high-quality housing with intensive, coordinated services aimed at helping individuals or families live a more productive life in their community. However, the process of seeking and securing affordable housing is traditionally very rigid and cumbersome. From providing the right documents to navigating bureaucratic red tape when applying for subsidized housing, the system can be likened to fitting a square peg in a round hole; residents often feel set up to fail, with often long wait periods and multiple steps for entry.

Beyond the housing itself, barriers to accessing resources, programs, and support to help individuals and families are often burdensome as well. Connected Communities' model is unique in the space of supportive housing as it takes a human-centered approach that simplifies, streamlines, and rationalizes a rather rigid and impersonal process. Their approach aims specifically to generate real, positive outcomes for individuals and families through an expansive network of partners and coordinated services.

CUSTOMER

Connected Communities
of WinnCompanies

SECTOR

Housing and community
development

PRODUCT

Bonterra Case
Management [Enterprise]

The societal cost of eviction

The societal costs associated with eviction are severe. Community engagement, economic mobility, education, employment, and even health are all negatively impacted by a lack of residential stability. For example, take an elderly person living in Boston that lacks affordable housing options. According to Senior Vice President of Connected Communities, Trevor Samios, they are 11% more likely to move into a state-funded assisted living home than their affordably housed counterpart as an individual grows older and their health needs increase. This, in turn, costs the state and healthcare providers millions of dollars every year. In Massachusetts, the cost for state-assisted senior living and care per individual averages about \$80,000 a year, not to mention hospitalization and other emergency costs. Those figures could be significantly reduced if these individuals could remain in their homes independently. In addition, children who switch schools frequently due to housing instability tend to perform poorly in school, have learning differences and behavioral problems and are less likely to graduate from high school.¹

More than 40% of the nation's 44 million renter households have extremely low incomes, indicating that affordable housing is just the tip of the iceberg for many families². As its name suggests, Connected Communities seeks to address this problem by connecting members of the communities it serves with hightouch wraparound support services in six targeted areas: housing stability, education, employment, community engagement, health and economic mobility through a large and growing network of partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) nationally.

The organization doesn't simply provide high-quality housing but empowers and supports residents to realize economic mobility, transitioning from affordable housing up the rungs of mixed-income housing and into the broader market, all within the same community. Their vision is to create collective community impact by developing partners and connecting individuals with CBOs and case managers they trust to provide guidance and access to the tools and resources that best fit their needs. Through their collective impact, Connected Communities exemplifies how providing individuals with an integrated, humanistic approach can lead to more impactful and sustainable outcomes—not just outputs—across their six outcome areas.

¹Voight, Shinn, & Nation. Vanderbilt University. The Longitudinal Effects of Residential Mobility on the Academic Achievement of Urban Elementary and Middle School Students. (2012)

²National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2021). The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Homes. https://reports.nlihc.org/sites/default/files/gap/Gap-Report_2021.pdf



Challenges

When Connected Communities first opened their doors, they solely handled inbound requests from residents. As they grew, they adopted a new program that allowed them to merge all of their property management and human service coordination information into one database—including demographic information of residents that lived in their target communities—using the database as a basic coordination tool. This allowed them to begin proactive outreach, which later evolved into household-level information gathering to better address needs and interests in real-time while simultaneously planning and implementing community and neighborhood-level service delivery strategies.

The organization recognized that access to more data would help them succeed at building deeper, personal connections within communities, both with residents and partners, strengthening their service delivery and program outcomes. With that in mind, Trevor emphasized the importance of data both internally and with their external partners. Internally, several software platforms were used and needed to integrate. For example, property management software didn't meet the needs of case management, resident or supportive services, so it was essential to integrate property management, case management, and program management tools internally to maximize service delivery. The team began leveraging a case management tool to store and analyze the data it was collecting, but there were still many hurdles that limited real-time understanding of service and program outcomes.

BUILDING TRUST

Information collection and building trust at a community level don't often work well in tandem. Those who live in affordable housing are surveyed from all angles, all the time, but are not often given responses or clear next steps on how their information will be used to support them. This can actively disengage people from the process altogether. Connected Communities' initial case management tool was structured in a way that enforced a lot of question asking but not a lot of response on an individual level. The group was very wary of asking questions for the sake of collecting information. They wanted to be able to connect someone to a resource based on the needs or interests an individual presented and then see that process through by collecting outcome data. The reporting tools they were using at the time were too high level and general to meet this need, not providing field teams with the information they needed to proactively address community-level and individual needs.



TIME AND RESOURCE NEEDS OF STAFF

Common in the social good sector, the staff at Connected Communities balances heavy workloads with little time and constrained budgets. Systems rife with time-consuming, multistep data intake and entry can slow down the day-to-day of helping individuals and families directly. This can often lead to high turnover amongst staff and stress in information gathering, leaving the work itself and the need for planning to take a second seat.

Connected Communities wanted to balance their team's need for intuitive, clear design and workflow with tools and reporting that would allow for sharpened planning, strategy and service delivery implementation. They needed something that was manageable and allowed them to organize their days efficiently, putting staff in the driver's seat so that information led to thoughtful decision making when working with an individual resident to access healthcare or working with a school system to understand barriers to educational outcomes for an entire community.

SEEING REAL-TIME IMPACT

Without an intuitive user experience and clear reporting, Connected Communities' large team of community coordinators, organizers, and regional staff could not see and understand program challenges, individual resident needs and barriers to outcomes. For a team laser-focused on helping communities connect the dots so a family can access affordable childcare to pursue employment, or a senior can get connected to local senior healthcare as they age in place, this was a monumental challenge.

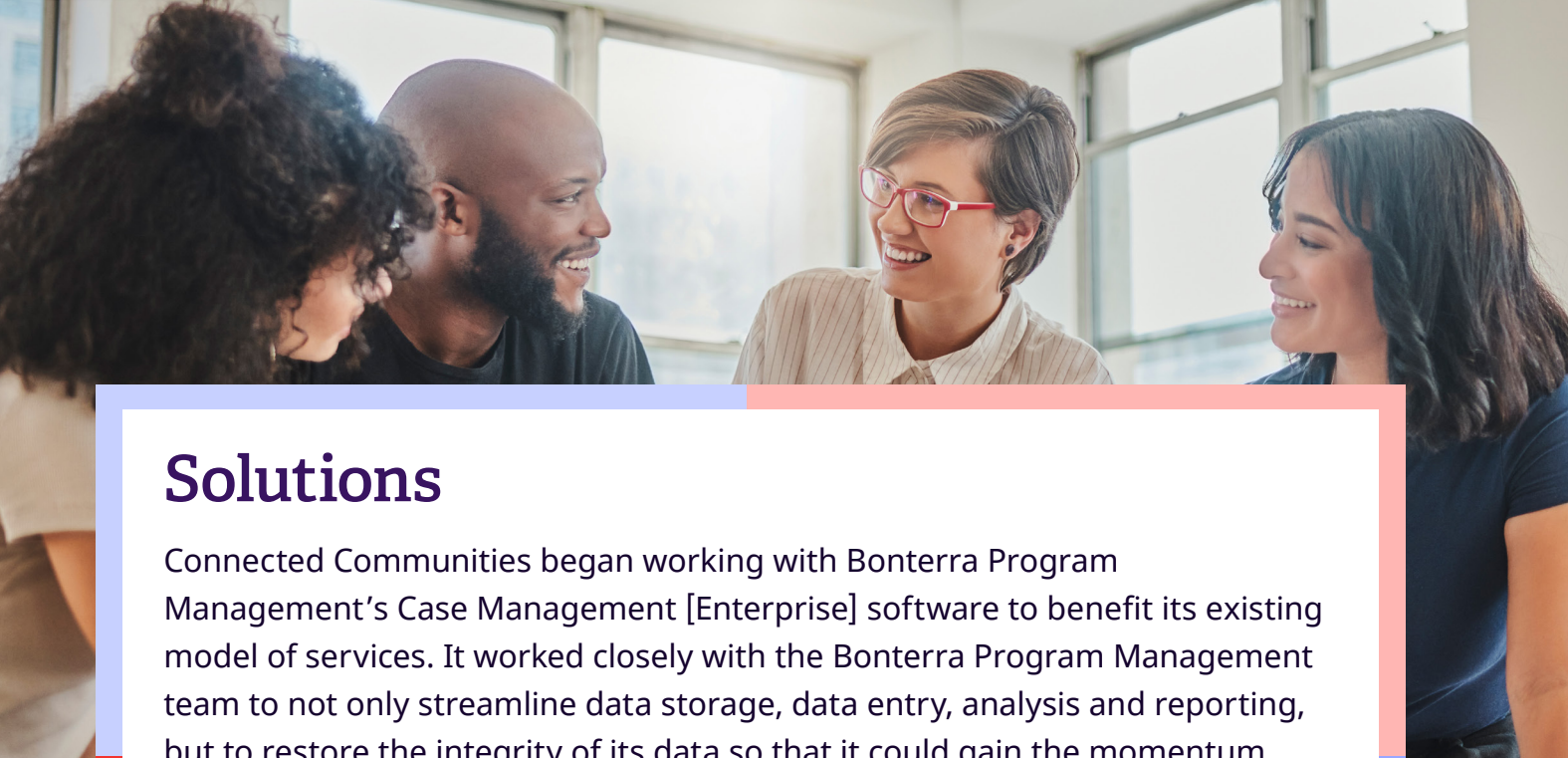
NEED FOR FLEXIBILITY

As Connected Communities worked toward building an integrated and streamlined approach to housing-based service delivery, they needed their solution to be just as fluid and customizable. However, their previous case management solution was extremely static; there were specific doorways into data integration. There was only one way to enter data and one frequency setting for updating information. This systems gap led to lower levels of connectivity between staff and community members and increased staff frustration in user experience.

OPEN GLITCHES AND DATA ACCURACY

The previous software solution also included many open glitch issues. Connected Communities' staff spent tens of hours weekly dealing with technical issues. Not only was this a sheer drain of time, but it led to data integrity concerns among its staff. As a result, there was a greater lack of trust in the system, which inhibited employees from leveraging data to create programs that fit their communities in the best way.





Solutions

Connected Communities began working with Bonterra Program Management's Case Management [Enterprise] software to benefit its existing model of services. It worked closely with the Bonterra Program Management team to not only streamline data storage, data entry, analysis and reporting, but to restore the integrity of its data so that it could gain the momentum needed to improve trust with residents and communities, strengthen and grow relationships with its broad base of national and local partners, and support policymakers in understanding the real needs, barriers, and solutions that could drive systemic changes in housing stability, employment, education, community engagement, health, and economic mobility, nationally.

“Much of our work is active listening when we meet with an individual or family. Our goal is to have trusted conversations and then be able to help and connect someone with a tool, resource or program based on what they are guiding us with. It was imperative that our team be able to see and clearly understand barriers to opportunity, interests and needs they were presented with by residents so we could respond and connect efficiently and effectively,”

— Trevor Samios, senior vice president,
Connected Communities

Specifically, Bonterra Program Management helped Connected Communities to:

CONNECT THE “LINKS IN THE CHAIN”

The intuitiveness of the Bonterra Case Management [Enterprise] design is a key factor in the success of Connected Communities’ implementation of the solution. Their staff uses the platform not only for data entry but as a method of coordinating their days in a way that is manageable, efficient and organized. Connected Communities also utilizes Case Management [Enterprise] to show “links in the chain” to its partners—demonstrating how, for example, increased enrollment in early education and after-school programs removes a barrier to employment for families while greatly benefitting educational outcomes for children. While these successes happen over long periods of time, Case Management [Enterprise] helps Connected Communities paint the bigger picture for prospective partners and encourage the longevity of its existing network.

OBTAIN FLEXIBILITY AND CUSTOMIZATION

Connected Communities worked with Bonterra Case Management [Enterprise] to develop an intuitive user experience that was molded based on the workflow of their team members. The platform adapts based on the evolution of the staff’s most pertinent needs. The Connected Communities team holds weekly Case Management [Enterprise] office hours to discuss the solution’s usage—what’s going well or what’s not—and go over suggestions from the team. The team has the ability to apply those changes immediately, which is a giant leap from its last case management solution. Trevor says his team appreciates seeing that a suggestion they made last Friday is updated in the system the following week. This feedback loop has improved engagement and adoption of the platform tremendously.

Case Management [Enterprise] also provides Connected Communities with customized, seamless data entry and outreach updates that mirror the activity of its community coordinators in real life. This promotes a greater level of intentionality in the work the staff is doing in terms of the planning, thinking and decision making going on throughout the organization at any given moment.

Furthermore, the data and reporting features of Case Management [Enterprise] are versatile. The dashboards illustrate indicator and outcome changes for specific groups of people, the gaps and service needs that should be addressed and by when. In addition, the dashboards show the impact and results of those programs which allows them to move the needle on specific outcomes more effectively because they can understand what is working in real time and what isn’t.

“ The Bonterra Case Management [Enterprise] system was not a ‘here’s our box, back into it’ solution. It was a ‘let’s learn what you do and make something that fits what you’re doing.’ That was a gamechanger for us.”

— Trevor Samios, senior vice president,
Connected Communities

INTEGRATION WITH REALPAGE

The flexibility of the Bonterra Case Management [Enterprise] solution played a key role in the successful and seamless integration with WinnCompanies’ property management platform RealPage. With the plugin, Connected Communities’ field team of community coordinators could easily organize and store electronic records and other digital compliance documents for its residents as well as automate service requests and manage asset conditions straight from the Case Management [Enterprise] dashboard.

Trevor said that the Bonterra Program Management team “took the time to meet with the RealPage team and their internal integration team to have thoughtful conversations and understand the best ways to work together.” He added that the collaboration between RealPage and Bonterra Program Management extended beyond just the initial plugin but looked at updates down the line and how changes would be planned and managed in the future.

The collaborative integration of RealPage and Case Management [Enterprise] eliminates interruption of the provision of services and assures consistency of information.

IMPROVE DATA INTEGRITY

For the first time, all of its case information, planning and delivery were in one easily accessible place. Demographic information—income, language, education—were all visible together as well. Community Coordinators can finally rely on the data they were viewing because it was consistent and organized. Finally, the coordinators were no longer experiencing glitch issues or having to submit support tickets and wait weeks for a fix. They were able to spend less time trying to get their data in order and more time focusing on their clients.

Impact

In the short term, Bonterra Case Management [Enterprise] has improved the efficiencies of the Connected Communities team, has eased administrative work and has enabled staff to see an impact at both an individual and program level. In the long term, Case Management [Enterprise] has given visibility into grander, community level-impact. It can efficiently identify gaps in programming, locate opportunities for engagement, articulate the programs that were working better than others and has helped build trust with partners.

COMMUNITY AND COLLECTIVE IMPACT

The reporting gathered through the Bonterra Case Management [Enterprise] solution enables Connected Communities to report back to community members and residents so they can become change agents themselves, equipping them with the information they need to help identify new deficits or barriers.

NEW LEVEL OF TRUST: RESIDENTS AND STAFF

The organization's follow-up process has improved as a result of Bonterra Case Management [Enterprise]. Staff is now able to make more referrals directly through Case Management [Enterprise] and follow up with individuals and partners to make sure every touchpoint is supported. The versatility of the platform has led to much faster response times with individuals, leading to a deeper level of trust with residents. The accuracy of the data is a welcomed change, too, and has resulted in less stress and turnover among staff.

GROWING THE PARTNER NETWORK

Connected Communities is a testimony to the fact that a collaborative effort leads to the greatest impact. As it thinks ahead, Connected Communities plans to utilize the Bonterra Case Management [Enterprise] solution to develop a way for a core network of affiliates and partners to collaborate with one another and share information on affordable housing and related support services. By manifesting a collective impact model across hundreds of communities around the country, Case Management [Enterprise] allows for real results for families fueled by analytics and reporting.