

Shelter Uses Network Technology to Help LA's Homeless Get Off the Streets

Executive Summary

Customer Name

The Midnight Mission

- Los Angeles, California, United States
- 176 full-time equivalent (FTE) workers, consisting mostly of recovery program participants and a small paid staff

Industry

Healthcare and Human Services (nonprofit)

Business Challenge

- Antiquated network infrastructure frequently failed, hampering efforts to secure donations
- Manual case management wasted staff time and money
- Unreliable PBX system interfered with voice communications
- Poor communications at warehouses resulted in food spoilage

Network Solution

- Installed a Cisco converged IP network for both voice and data communications
- Implemented a wireless network to provide full coverage throughout the facility

Business Results

- 700,000 more meals served by using money saved from Cisco grant, and by reducing the number of IT staff through improved network reliability
- Cabling costs reduced by \$40,000
- Food spoilage in warehouse reduced by \$25,000 per year
- Success rate for drug and alcohol program participants improved by 30 percent, partly due to new IP phones enabling regular communications with family members
- Cell-phone costs reduced by 40 percent

Cisco® IP data and voice network enables The Midnight Mission to improve communications, human services, and recovery opportunities.

Business Challenge

Since 1914, The Midnight Mission has been providing homeless services to men, women, and children throughout the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area. Based in downtown LA's "Skid Row," the Mission is the city's largest nondenominational social



services provider, and serves 75,000 meals each month. On a given day, about 1500 people walk through its doors seeking meals, shelter, educational training, medical treatment, recovery programs, and other desperately needed services.

Since most of The Midnight Mission's resources are typically used to serve a large homeless population that has so many urgent needs, technology has always been a low priority. "We did not have the funding to have any type of IT infrastructure," says Gregg Johnson, associate director of Building Services and IT. "Whatever computers and equipment we could get through donations, we would try to utilize."

As a result, The Midnight Mission's network was made up of a mixture of mismatched, outdated equipment. It connected 30 to 35 PCs, which were used for Internet access and for running productivity applications, including Microsoft Office and Outlook (for e-mail). "Our most bandwidth-intensive program was Blackbaud, which had all the information on all the donors who have ever given to us," says Johnson. But on several occasions, the network could not accommodate this application's demand, and failed. Then, because it was based on older technology, it required two to three days to rebuild.

The Midnight Mission's outmoded IT infrastructure and its antiquated private branch exchange (PBX) system were badly hindering its communications. Often workers would try to e-mail potential donors of food or products, only to have the network fail. Since information could not be turned around quickly, opportunities for donations were frequently missed. "We would often get a phone call from a major film production, TV studio, or the Hollywood Bowl, saying that if we could fax or e-mail confirmation that we

are a legitimate home shelter, we would get 1000 meals that night,” says Art Mattox, chief operating officer. “Because we did not have the infrastructure to get them the information that they needed, we lost a lot of donations.”

Worse yet, the unreliable phone system would stop working in the middle of crucial phone calls with homeless clients. “Very desperate people needed referrals and services, and we could not communicate with them,” says Mattox. Moreover, employees were forced to use their own cell phones, and exceed their allotment of minutes, simply because these phones were more reliable than the existing land lines.

With The Midnight Mission preparing to move into a new facility in April 2005, nobody wanted to transfer these problems from the old building. “We were basically applying temporary solutions to our network,” says Johnson. “We were in desperate need of reliable, up-to-date technology.”

“In just half a day, we programmed an IP phone and set up an Internet connection for [the LA County Department of Public Social Services]. Soon they were able to get four times more families into shelters and food stamp programs.”

– Art Mattox, Chief Operating Officer, The Midnight Mission

Network Solution

To replace the outmoded network, The Midnight Mission applied to Cisco Systems® for a Cisco Product Grant valued at \$90,000. The product grant request included switches, routers, wireless access points, IP Communications software, IP phones, and more.

Cisco approved the grant, and The Midnight Mission’s IT department selected NEC as the partner to help with the installation. “The IT department spent about three days straight getting the new system up and running in the new building,” says Johnson. “We had already configured everything at our old building, and only had a few minor problems.”

The Cisco grant was part of a larger IT upgrade planned for the new building. “We added Dell systems, servers, and workstations, plus HP printers,” says Johnson. “But Cisco was the backbone for everything to work.” An added benefit to the upgrade was standardization. “We gained the ability to bring all our PCs to the same platform and bring all our software into compliance,” says Mattox. “Now, everyone’s software works with everything.”

Business Results

The most immediate benefit of The Midnight Mission’s new network infrastructure was that the money saved by the grant could be spent to feed more people. “The original Cisco grant enabled us to serve 540,000 meals over the next year,” says Mattox. “Because we now have a stable system with common standards, we were also able to reduce the number of IT staff, which allowed us to serve an additional 160,000 meals a year.”

Other cost savings have come from the IP phone system, which has given The Midnight Mission reliable communications for the first time. Cell-phone costs have been reduced by 40 percent, from \$3000 to \$1800 per month, since the staff is now able to use land lines. But the savings in human terms have been even more dramatic. “We no longer lose critical calls,” says Mattox.

The converged IP network has reduced costs even more. “We were able to save about \$40,000 in cabling at the new building, because we were able to use the same cable to run our network and our phones, instead of two completely separate lines,” says Johnson. “Once we get everything finished, we will be able to save money monthly by reducing the number of phone lines.”

Before the network deployment, The Midnight Mission would have to throw away \$25,000 in donated food every year, due to spoilage. “The warehouse PC was so old and network access so unreliable that the food guy there could not access the shared hard drive to upload the food

inventory,” says Mattox. “Now he uploads it daily. We see which food is next in rotation, and which food needs to be used. This has contributed to our being able to reduce our food costs from 25 to 8 cents a plate.”

Having the new network helps The Midnight Mission deliver on its mission. “We have made a conscious effort to provide a higher level of service to our clients,” says Mattox.

“Consequently, we are more successful and are able to get more people on to recovery.” One example of this success has come in the drug and alcohol recovery program, where the 240 participants can now use secured IP phones to call their families. This close contact during the year-long program has resulted in a 30 percent higher success rate in transitioning participants.

The new network and IP phone system have also enabled additional resources to be brought in from outside. “The LA County Department of Public Social Services asked us if we had any room in our building for them to set up a desk,” says Johnson. “In just half a day, we programmed an IP phone and set up an Internet connection for them. Soon they were able to get four times more families into shelters and food stamp programs, just by having a desk in the homeless mission instead of a county office.”

The improved communications provided by the new network means that there are no longer any missed donations. “We now get food from TV and movie productions, major sports teams, and entertainment venues,” says Mattox. “The network has eliminated all the problem areas.”

Additionally, the new network supports wireless connectivity throughout the entire building, enabling remote access from any location through laptops. Moreover, it has reduced the number of security incidents, as surveillance cameras have been installed throughout the building, providing video feeds that can be viewed from PCs. And it enables the IT department to set up a computer lab, ultimately providing another way to serve clients. “We will be teaching Internet and Outlook classes, and help people gain more skills and get a job,” says Johnson.

Thanks to the successful network deployment and its positive results, the people at The Midnight Mission know that they can rely on Cisco as a partner. “At critical moments, when we were trying to get this building open, they were great,” says Mattox. “We made some errors on our equipment grant request, but Cisco was very accommodating. They swapped equipment, and made it an outstanding process from beginning to end. The commitment that Cisco has made to this community is something the whole world should know about.”

For More Information

To learn more about The Midnight Mission, please call 213-624-9258, ext 1243, or visit the Website at www.midnightmission.org.

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