

Shelter Helper

Team

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Problem Statement and Solution

Through our user research at local Seattle Homeless Shelters and Social Workers we found several pain points. Social workers and Shelter staff have hectic schedules and often are not able to find adequate services for their guests. Information and access to social services, such as shelters, food banks, soup kitchens, health care etc. are spread throughout many forms and not easily accessible when necessary. In addition, we found issues regarding privacy and security in the check-in process and guest identity verification.

Shelter Helper is a web based application that is designed to help homeless shelters streamline the intake process of clients by saving information to reduce workload of future check-in's and allowing paper intake forms to be easily transferred to electronic documents. By storing guest's information in a secure platform, guests will not have to repeatedly be subjected to the uncomfortable in-take process. Shelter Helper also uses this information to connect clients with desired social services by generating a list of services they qualify for based on their intake form and information provided. Shelter Helper will also supply a list of missing qualifications or pieces of information that are needed to receive additional long-term services, such as applying for EBT/WIC, Medicaid, Permanent Housing.

Stakeholders & Research Goal

The stakeholders for our project are local shelter staff, volunteers, and social workers. The goal of our user research was to gain a deeper understanding of our stakeholders and main users working environment and identify needs and pain points. Due to time constraints, we were unable to conduct contextual inquiries. Instead, we focused on interviewing three members of the Homeless Shelter Community.

Main Themes

Communication between shelters when finding a bed from someone for the night is a priority because of safety concerns is the main focus of a shelter. This not only includes the shelter someone might be trying to get into but also, in the case where they are not able stay at that particular shelter, that the shelter be able to quickly and thoroughly give them information, resources and assist them in finding space at another shelter.

Participants

Charlotte Sanders, MSW: Charlotte Sanders is a teaching associate for the University of Washington's School of Social Work. She is the head of the Northwest Leaders in Behavioral Health Program and has been working with homeless youth and young adults for the past 22 years. Lately, she has been working with NeighborCare Health's Homeless Youth Clinic as an onsite social worker. She is a good participant for our research because of her knowledge of the whole system of social services as it pertains to homelessness and her experience working in Seattle with the homeless community. We think it is important to gain data from many different levels of the community that serves homeless individuals. We can use these differing layers of information to better help find major themes across our research.

Katherine Wang, Roots Shelter: Katherine is a volunteer who has been at the Roots Shelter at 43rd and University Way for the last seven months. As a volunteer, she assists with several tasks around the shelter including the check in process. We conducted an in person interview with her because her direct relationship with a shelter helped us get very specific and in depth insights. We were told problems or inefficiencies that the shelter deals with regarding the check in process. We also got specific information on how shelter deals with communications with other shelters or services when they can't provide them. We think that this in-depth look is vital to us so we can work in conjunction with the broad view provided by Sanders along with other upcoming interviews from shelters. The personal interaction we could explore because of Katherine's in depth look helped verify the themes located on different layers of information.

Gillian Parke, Director of Sacred Heart: She oversees the shelter operations and staff. Gillian has been with Catholic Communications Services for 20 years. The first 10 years, she was with Noel House, a single women's homeless shelter. The last 10 years, she has been the Director for Sacred Heart, an institution that helps families by providing services like housing, food, and children's programs. She has been in social justice work for 33-34 years and got her start by volunteering in a program in college in Illinois. After her experience volunteering she changed her focus to social work. Gillian provided us with information about Sacred Heart's operation and services. Sacred Heart is an organized shelter that has been established for years and has a good system in place. The interview provided context for what a successful shelter needs to run. There were differences observed between Roots and Sacred Heart, but some commonalities emerged, especially in how technology was utilized. The information gained from this interview validates some of our assumptions and focuses our future research and design.

Research Results and Themes

For the three interviews we completed, we identified themes that the participants have stated are issues when working with homeless communities. Safety of the client is a common theme when it comes to why shelters are useful and an area where improvement can be made. The resources available to shelters is a constant concern in due to lack of money, time, and staff.

Shelters provide safety and security for guests to sleep for those lucky enough to get in for the night. Safety is always a concern, and during the day people are at risk for exploitation and violence. Shelters and housing services factor in safety when deciding who receives a certain service, this could be for a place to sleep for the night or for permanent or transitional housing.

Shelters need more resources to be able to better serve the homeless community. At Roots, volunteers use pencils and paper to do check-ins because there are not enough computers or space for each volunteer to have one for their own work space. The volunteers must also read these forms, which can be very personal, aloud to guests. This is usually conducted in an open environment where other guests are waiting. In our interviews, there was mention that this can be uncomfortable for the volunteer and guest. At Sacred Heart, most guests are referred through the Coordinated Entry for All system that King County operates. Guests are assessed through this system and given a score based on their needs. These scores determine their placement into a shelter. Although the standard intake process occurs through King County, Sacred Heart conducts its own intake as well using pen and paper. Unlike Roots, Sacred Heart has a room that they take guests to when filling out these forms. The information is later transferred to a computer.

We also found that resources are a reason that shelters are not able to be open for longer hours and why they cannot have more staff on hand to help clients. If a shelter could stay open longer or even during the day they could dedicate time to helping connect people with vital social services. With an increase in hours of operation, shelters would need resources and funds to get more staff and training. Currently, Roots uses a third-party service for a single case manager. They are planning to hire their own case manager to better help serve their clients. Case managers are a vital link between the homeless community and social services. They have knowledge of the requirements and can provide a reliable source of information and a way to make progress on applications for social services over time.

From the information gathered at Roots, Sacred Heart, and the interview we did with Charlotte Sanders there is evidence to suggest that there is little to no communication between shelters. This is especially true when shelters are full and are looking for beds. Volunteers must call other shelters looking for space, which is a strain on the time of both the volunteer and the person they call.

Task Analysis

1. Who is going to use the design?

The users of our design will be the staff of homeless shelters, this includes social workers who may work with clients to secure social services and meet basic needs and volunteers who complete the check-in of clients and do many other tasks related to the routine function of the shelter.

2. What tasks do they now perform?

Roots

- Completion of Intake Process
- Preparation of Meals (Breakfast and Dinner)
- Maintain Bathrooms and Manage Shower Times of Clients
- Dispense Beds, mats and linen for the night to Clients

Sacred Heart

Services provided by Shelter to Guests

- Overnight Shelter (24 hour shelter)
- Case Management Services Throughout
- Hygiene (showers/laundry)
- Mail service
- Services with Kids => Activities with Volunteers

Volunteer Tasks at Sacred Heart

- Activities with kids in evening for Children's program
- Answer the phone and door
- Interact with guests
- Shifts of 2-4 hours (support residents and staff)
- Both during the day and into the evening
- Write thank you notes
- Help with special events Soup Line/Breakfast

3. What tasks are desired?

Tasks desired by the staff at Roots and Sacred Heart are a smoother intake process, some way to find space in shelters for individuals better and quicker, more resources for training staff, and more information on resources to provide to clients.

4. How are the tasks learned?

Tasks are learned by social workers over the course of their careers and also specific job tasks that are unique to different job sites. Volunteers are trained at shelters to specific tasks. There is also a large amount of knowledge gained through experience. Like how best to find a bed for someone or which service might be able to help this person best. At Sacred Heart, there is a specific training that staff and volunteers will go through depending on their designated tasks.

5. Where are the tasks performed?

Tasks are generally performed at the local homeless shelters. The intake process at Roots takes place in an open area, so there is little to no privacy in conducting these "interviews". At Sacred Heart, they are more established and have a room where guests answer these questions. Sacred Heart only houses 10 families at a time for much longer periods, 3-4 months, while Roots takes in individuals for one night, every night.

6. What is the relationship between the person and data?

Volunteers and social workers look at data they collect on individuals during the intake process. Volunteers collect information on a client including demographics, mental health, and health history. Then a social worker would use this information with the client to connect them with relevant services. Other person data relationships would be where other shelters are, who they are able to admit, and if they have space. At roots this data must be gathered every time a client checks in at the shelter, there is no way currently of quickly looking up this information from past stays if it is kept at all.

7. What other tools does the person have?

Roots and Sacred Heart use both paper and pen and computers to store their information. At Roots, to check-in guests efficiently, multiple volunteers work concurrently, so they must do it on paper since they can't all use the computers. Furthermore, the volunteers walk around the shelter to do the intakes, so they must have something portable. More "important" legal information is stored in the computers.

8. How do people communicate with each other?

Between shelters and organizations communication is done primarily through phone and email. When volunteers and social workers communicate with clients it is usually done by normal person to person communication.

9. How often are the tasks performed?

At Roots, intake forms are completed upon guest's entry of the shelter. Dinner is provided each night, as well as social time for the guest community. Showers are provided every morning as well as breakfast before guests must leave for the day and return that night at 8pm. There is a case manager that comes into the shorter frequently to talk with clients about their needs, but currently they are not able to come every night and due to people not having guaranteed space there every night this service is inconsistent.

Sacred Heart is much different. Rather than a traditional shelter, like Roots, that rotates guests every night, Sacred Heart takes in 10 families and provides excellent care to get them back on their feet. These tasks are available during the participants stay, usually 3-4 months but this can be up to 9 months. This care includes finding jobs, permanent housing, and other basic needs.

10. What are the time constraints on the tasks?

Shelters usually operate on a tight schedule and are rarely, if at all, 24 hour operations. The Roots shelter operates during the night hours. Guests must be lined up at the door at 8:00 PM and the intake process occurs at 8:30 PM.

Sacred Heart is a 24-hour facility but only hosts referred families. Also, families are only allowed to stay for up to 9 months. So, any services and help they require needs to be secured during this time.

11. What happens when things go wrong?

At Roots when the shelter is full there is a lottery drawing (everyone is entered into the lottery, not just those who come last). If someone is not picked, then volunteers/workers work with that individual and call around close by shelters to see if they have room that night.

At Sacred Heart they have the problem of not having enough space for every homeless family. They take families with drug and alcohol dependency and other challenges and works with them on a one-on-one basis to provide help and support, but these issues rarely become a problem for the shelter or the families that live there.

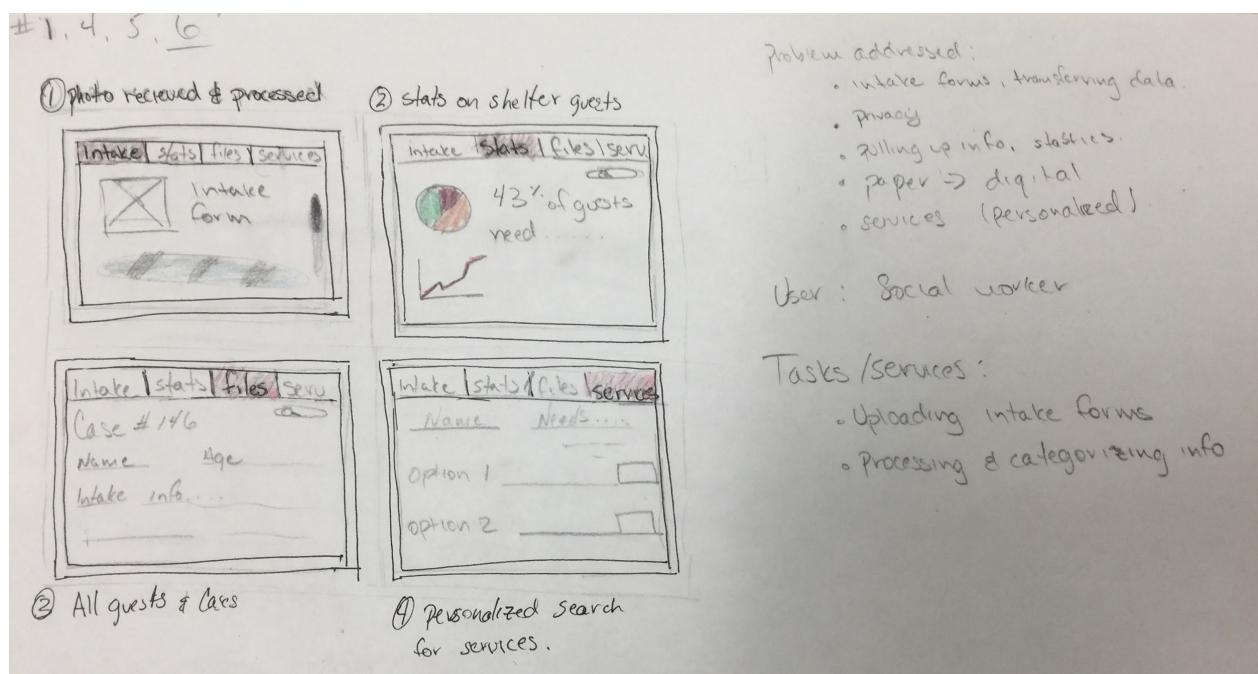
Designs

Tasks

1. Receiving guests (in-take process, privacy concerns)
2. Talking with guests (conversations, check-ins)
3. Providing services for people who cannot stay at shelters (overflow problems)
4. Providing non-shelter related services
5. Permitting guests to come to the shelter when they don't have an ID
6. Applying for grants or philanthropic resources

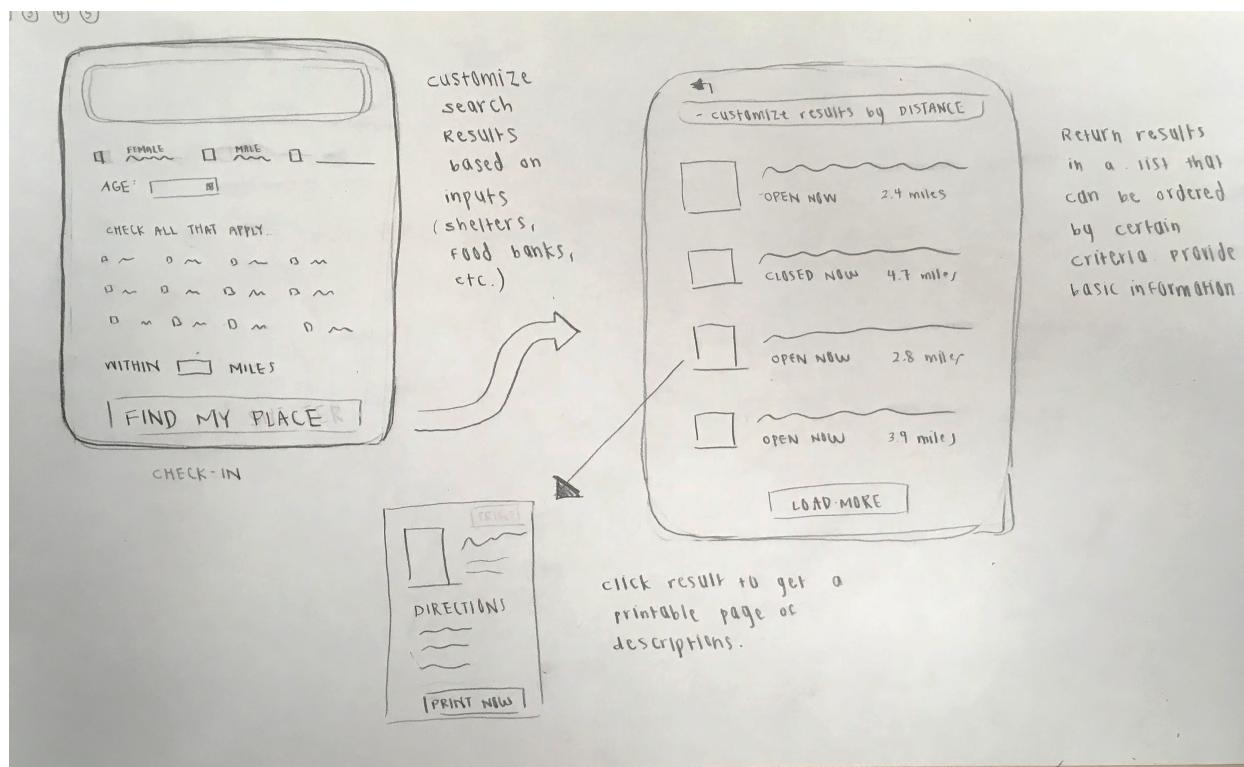
Design 1

The first design is a web based application that addresses problems of uploading guest data & privacy (task 1), locating non-shelter services (task 4&5), and provide updated stats on shelter guests for grant writing purposes (task 6). The user will have the ability to quickly upload guest information (intake form) in an easy, private, and organized way (scanning form or taking a photo). This information would be stored under "Files" where it could easily be reached if the Social worker needed to access information about a specific guest. Users would also have the ability to help guests who have specific needs, such as applying for EBT or Medicaid, to find the information they need and further instructions. In addition, when the social worker is looking for information about the shelter when filling out grant applications, users can easily locate relevant shelter statistics. These statistics would be compiled from the client files and provided in an easy to read format with photos and graphs.



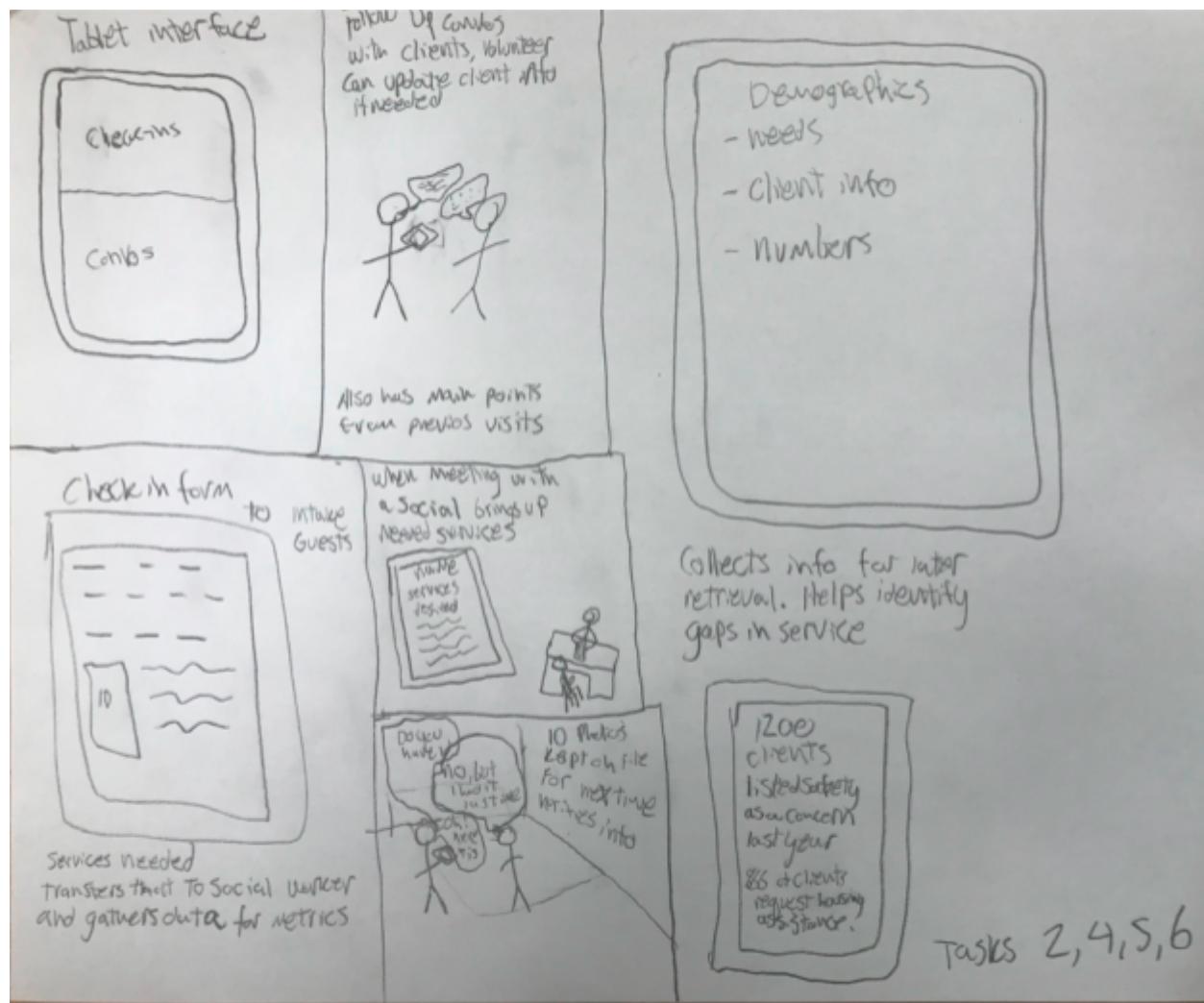
Design 2

The second design is a tablet application that will be placed at a kiosk. This application will be used by the guests themselves without the aid of a volunteer or shelter staff. A user will be directed to the home page where they check boxes that meet the criteria of what they are looking for (shelters, food banks, etc.). Users can specify what kind of requirements they meet or don't have (task 5). The customized search will take them to a results page that will organize the results based on certain criteria (customizable by the user). Each result will contain a basic description of the place. Once a result is clicked, the user will be directed to an easily printable page of directions and more information (task 3 & 4). Users do not need to input any personally identifying information, so that their privacy is ensured (task 1).



Design 3

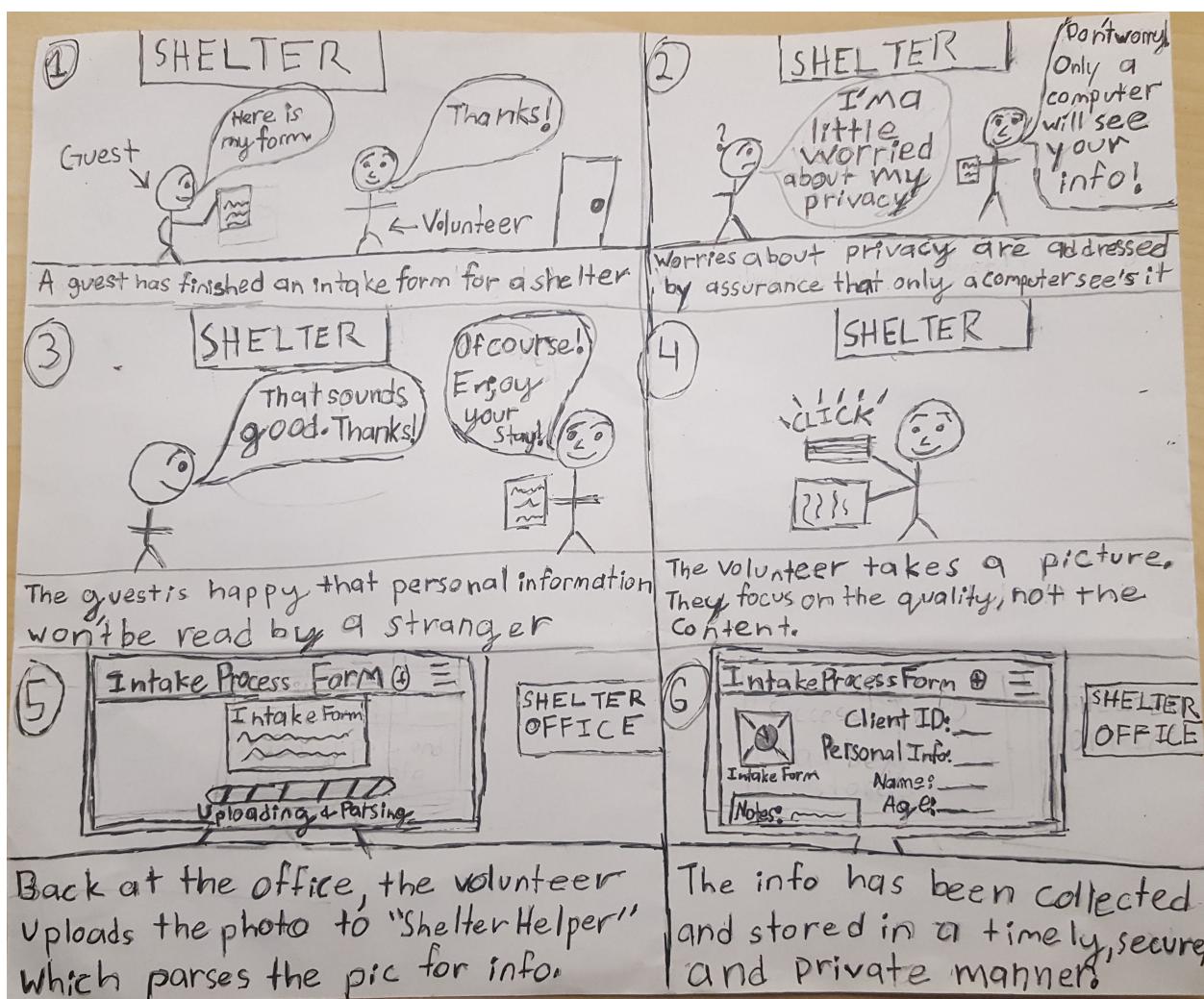
This design uses a tablet application in a shelter to assist with check-ins by providing an interface holding the check-in sheet that will save data for later analysis by the shelter operators. It will also provide a space to update the needs of a client during conversations held at the shelter (TASK 2). These needs will be saved to keep track of this information over time and so it is easily accessible by social workers during consults with clients. Identification will be kept on file electronically so people will not always need to have their ID if it expires or is lost, this is so the identity of the individual can be used to connect them to social services (TASK 5). All data is used later by the shelter to see what services people ask for and basic demographics on the populations they serve (TASK 4 & 6).



Written Scenarios & Storyboards

Task 1

Depicting a guest of the shelter filling out an intake form, they are curious about what it is used for and how their information will be treated. They are reassured that there are security processes in line for their privacy and that they can access resources and the shelter more easily in the future. The volunteer then uploads a photo of the form to Shelter Helper, and the information is properly parsed and stored on file.



Task 4

George Crow is a guest residing at Roots Shelter. George wants to apply for the SNAP program, but he has no idea if he even qualifies for the program. George approaches one of the social workers at the shelter and asks for help. The social worker looks up George's name in the database and finds all of George's information that was previously inputted when George first arrived at the shelter. He sees that George may qualify for certain programs, which are listed first in the database. Since the social worker does not have a lot of time, he offers to print out the paper application, so that George can apply for the services that he qualifies for.

