

Case Study



ServeMinnesota

Data-Driven Analysis To Maximize Resources and Program Impact

ServeMinnesota is the Minnesota state commission for AmeriCorps. It helps its community partners get the grant funding they need to make a positive social impact and address critical needs throughout the state.

Dedicated to creating data-driven solutions to address issues including educational achievement, economic opportunity, housing stability, recovery from substance use disorders, and climate mitigation, ServeMinnesota manages programs with the support of thousands of members across the state.

Effectively managing these programs presents a variety of challenges, especially because of the wide diversity in the type and size of programs offered and the scope of information that is tracked and reported on. It also must have the agility to respond quickly to changing needs. When new initiatives and funding opportunities come up, the ServeMinnesota team must act fast, ensuring that members deployed to program initiatives can work productively and efficiently.



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Mayank Gupta

Information Systems Analyst, ServeMinnesota

Costly User Fees Impact Efficiency and Program Insight

Program data is collected and reported continuously. This enables the people managing members to keep all tasks on target and confirm that program milestones are achieved. The data is also used internally to measure performance results and identify opportunities for improvement. And it is shared with the ServeMinnesota board of directors, its partner organizations, the AmeriCorps federal entity and, in some cases, private funders.

With broad reporting needs, and tools created over time, ServeMinnesota developed multiple data management apps and tracking methods, each offering varying levels of efficiency and program insight. The organization's largest programs run on custom-developed software that gives stakeholders a real-time view into the data without needing to spend hours of staff time putting it together in a report. Because of cost and speed of deployment, that development model can't be applied across all programs.



For those other programs, they needed to find an agile, low cost system where they could spin up apps in days at the right cost per app based on their overall program goals. Before discovering Knack, some programs were run on a different no-code app platform called Quickbase. The trouble was, that platform had a user-based pricing model. "The per user license fees were getting to be way too high. That was a big problem," said Mayank Gupta, Information Systems Analyst for ServeMinnesota. The user fees made it cost prohibitive to continue using and to deploy across new initiatives.

That left some programs to rely on spreadsheet-based workflows. The spreadsheets required hours and hours of extra time to manage, which was time that members and staff could have otherwise applied to more value-added activities. Spreadsheets also left program reporting vulnerable to data integrity issues. "Trying to cobble data together after the fact left us with tons of missing data and bad-data issues we had to resolve," said Mayank.

The data isn't static, so each reporting cycle was only a brief snapshot that was immediately out of date. A week later, the data collection and analysis process would need to start all over. It consumed an excessive amount of time and resources. And because the data was captured in periodic polls, it was impossible to immediately identify issues with missing data or data that doesn't make sense, especially because of the lack of data validation capabilities in spreadsheets.

Spreadsheets also created data privacy concerns. They don't provide password management or role-based access features to ensure that users can only view and edit data they are authorized to manage. And with spreadsheets being emailed between program members, there was no way to maintain version control, track copies, or know where the data went.



Knack Improves Data Access for Performance Improvement

It was time to find a solution that could securely capture program data in real time, in a customized app that would be easy and intuitive for program members to use, have robust reporting capabilities and without the cost-prohibitive expense of a user-based pricing model.

The search for solutions led to Knack. Mayank Gupta signed up to trial Knack and was able to quickly build an app based on a pre-designed template. He found Knack's UX to be a lot more straightforward than the expensive Quickbase solution he'd used previously. "Knack is focused on knowing you're going to build some kind of front-end app and you need a database for it. It's exactly what we needed for this sort of data collection," said Mayank.

Other solutions he investigated were more complex to set up and get the right look and functionality. They had too many bells and whistles that weren't needed and made the apps unnecessarily complicated and costly. Their complexity made it feel like a dedicated team would be required to build and manage. "Finding Knack was the best fit cost-wise and performance-wise," said Mayank.

Program Agility With Easy App Building and Fast Deployment

Mayank works with the business lead for each program to gather requirements before he builds the Knack apps. This allows him to determine exactly what customization is needed to suit the program and how it will work best for users.

"Knack allows us to build the data structure for any program quickly. Most of the time now, I'm copying an existing app and updating it with the terminology for the new app," said Mayank. This is critical because when a new initiative is formed, turnaround time is key to success.

For example, the state of Minnesota enlisted ServeMinnesota's assistance in helping state organizations figure out how to respond to specific issues created by the pandemic. The initiative was very broad, and they had only two months to figure out the entire program and just two weeks to create the app for all these members to use. "Knack was the perfect tool for me to create and deploy something quickly," said Mayank.

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Mayank Gupta
Information Systems Analyst, ServeMinnesota



Pricing Model Enables App Rollout to All Program Members

The pricing model also fits ServeMinnesota's budget and operational requirements. It enabled a move away from a costly user-based model. "With Knack, it's just the number of records and that's pretty appealing. That's something I can generally calculate in my head based on how I was planning to build the app," Mayank said.

That's important because the programs shift from year to year. It's impossible to know what new initiatives the business side of the organization will bring forward in the coming year, and what level of user access new programs will require. Working in partnership with the program business lead, Mayank can estimate the number of records required for a new program app before he builds it. "I can do a quick mental calculation and know we have enough records – we will not go over our limit," said Mayank.

That's especially helpful because sometimes the member recruitment for AmeriCorps programs is challenging. "The initial goal might be 50 members, but the final member count might be 10 or 15. With user-based pricing, we would have already paid for 50 licenses," Mayank said.

Powerful Connectivity for Real-Time Organizational Reporting

ServeMinnesota's tech stack also includes Power BI, used for organization-level reporting. With access to Knack's API and leveraging the Knack community of users for information and insight, Mayank could build to built a connection between the Knack apps and the Power BI system to unify the data and prevent data silos.

"Using the Knack API, our Power BI reports are refreshed nightly from Knack. It gives all our stakeholders the right level of access, and brings our Knack data together in one view with our other organizational data," said Mayank.



Robust Security for Data Privacy

Data security is not only important but also a requirement for ServeMinnesota. Some of the program apps include personally identifiable information (PII), so managing those programs using spreadsheets wouldn't meet the compliance requirements for data privacy. That type of data can't be kept spreadsheets with no password management or circulated via email.

Knack provides the role-based access controls these programs need. "It allows us to give members, advisors, and program staff easy access to all the data they need, with secure login pages so they can see only the data they should see. We're also on the [HIPAA-level plan](#), which gives us the security we're looking for with the PII apps," said Mayank.

Empowering Users – Anytime, Anywhere

ServeMinnesota depends on Knack to track program success rates and report to stakeholders and internal teams. The reports provide data-driven intelligence into what's working and identify opportunities for improvement – delivered in the form of actionable insights.

One of the many problems ServeMinnesota experienced using forms or spreadsheets was that members didn't have visibility to confirm and track their own submissions. Once they submitted the form, it was gone. And spreadsheets weren't a good solution because there were so many different spreadsheets they had to have open and keep track of.

"Knack allows members to easily enter data for every week of service, or every session with a participant. They can enter all the data we care about and see the data they've entered already," said Mayank. "When program staff log in, they see curated views that show their members and their key metrics. At a glance, they can see who's on track and who's not instead of spending so many hours looking through each spreadsheet separately."



What's Next for ServeMinnesota and Knack?

Knack continues to play a pivotal role at ServeMinnesota. Due to its ease of building, intuitive user experience, robust reporting, data security and API integration capabilities, Knack apps are the go-to solution when new programs and initiatives are identified.

“Knack has become a core part of making a new AmeriCorps program for us. Now it's built in – we're going to use Knack to do the data management. I don't know how we could scale any of this without a system like Knack,” said Mayank.

About Knack

Knack eliminates business blindspots and improves operational excellence by connecting your data, teams, and customers. Knack is trusted by thousands of small businesses and Fortune 500 companies to increase visibility of data and manage operational processes seamlessly all with no code.

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