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App fixes volunteer woes of Food from the Heart



A group of five friends - (from left) Mr Leonard Yeo, Mr Rawwinton Tan, Mr Sivakumar Palaniappan, Ms Mabel Chew and Mr C.J. Lee - developed the app to help reallocate delivery routes to volunteers from Food from the Heart. It was one of eight winners at the GeoHackathon held earlier this month. PHOTO: UP SINGAPORE

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Mobile app's creators among 8 winners of contest on use of geospatial technology



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About 100 Food from the Heart (FFTH) volunteers are needed to collect unsold bread from bakeries and deliver them to beneficiaries at some 180 locations islandwide every day.

The challenge is compounded when regular volunteers are overseas and replacements - sometimes up to 40 - are needed.

Coordinating the deliveries from 100 bakeries to welfare homes and self-collection centres while being short-handed is something that FFTH hopes to avoid each day.

A group of five friends, however, may just have the solution: a mobile app.

The prototype works just like popular taxi booking app GrabTaxi: If a volunteer cannot make his delivery, he "de-registers" from the route through the app and an alert is sent to all other available volunteers via SMS.

Who can step in to help, would then log in to the app, find out where the pick-up and drop-off locations are, get directions or check carpark rates, and accept the route.

The group was among eight winners at the GeoHackathon - a competition in which people had to use geospatial technology to create websites or apps to address problems in society.

The hackathon, organised by the Singapore Land Authority (SLA), was held earlier this month.

SLA senior deputy director Lewis Wu said the app is a good demonstration of how geospatial technology can be applied to help FFTH volunteers make better decisions when planning their deliveries while on the move.

Web designer Leonard Yeo, one of the members in the team that designed the app for FFTH, said they decided to take on the help group's challenge and design an app to help manage its volunteers - especially when replacements are needed urgently.

"Food is wasted if the unsold bread is not given to anyone," said Mr Yeo, 26.

"FFTH is doing its best to deliver this to the needy, but it has coordination difficulties and we thought it'd be very meaningful if we could help it."

Mr Yeo, however, admitted he was surprised by the FFTH's scale of operations.

Each month, FFTH volunteers deliver about 28,000kg of bread to some 14,500 beneficiaries.

A single staff member mans a mobile phone line that volunteers call when they cannot make a delivery. He or she then has to find a replacement - from its pool of 1,700 volunteers - who is familiar with the route and contact him to check for his availability. It is an effort that could take up to half an hour.

FFTH executive director Anson Quek said the app would come in useful during crunch time.

"It will help reduce the time needed to find a replacement volunteer, enabling us to reach out to more volunteers because the request for a replacement is blasted out to a wider pool of people," he said.

The app for FFTH is likely to be ready by the end of the year.

When asked if the app could lead to volunteers opting out more often since it would be easier to find a replacement, Mr Quek said it was unlikely because he believes most volunteers "are committed".

"In fact, the app may lead to an increase in volunteer numbers as we can provide sufficient support in the event that they cannot carry out their duties due to urgent matters," added Mr Quek.

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