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## Homeless program's IT guy knows tech, troubles

Mass High Tech: The Journal of New England Technology - by [Efrain Viscarolasaga](#) Mass High Tech

In 1999, when Lee Cowgill joined the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program as a network administrator, the group's technological demands were minimal. The group boasted no e-mail and no Internet connection, and its data center took up little space and ran only basic applications such as Microsoft Access databases to track information regarding the homeless of the region.

"It was eight servers and me in a tiny closet," said Cowgill.

Today, the group boasts 35 servers running more than 40 applications, as well as cutting-edge services such as voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) and remote networking for clinicians in the field. Last week, the BHCHP moved its headquarters from Massachusetts Avenue to Albany Street's Jean Yawkey Place (once the city morgue), and as a result has added even more gear, including new storage equipment from Hopkinton-based **EMC Corp.** and new network switches from Marlborough's **3Com Corp.**



Efrain Viscarolasaga

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While administrators, corporate executives and donors have played critical roles in making the BHCHP one of the most comprehensive health care for the homeless programs in the nation, it is Cowgill who has been the point man in the organization's technological adoption.

But he is more than a technology evangelist for the organization. A former homeless person himself, he knows the group's infrastructure is more than just cool new gear.

"There is always a human side to what we do," he said. "Technology is not a goal, but a tool to help us accomplish our goals."

Twenty years ago, Cowgill went through the area's public treatment program, homeless and battling alcoholism. As he progressed through his recovery, he volunteered to help others in similar situations at the **Pine Street Inn** -- an unexpected catalyst into a new career in technology.

"I had always been interested in technology," he said. "At Pine Street, they didn't have any of their records in electronic format at the time, so we began a program with help from UMass

Boston to deploy a new system."

While the volunteer project was temporary, it spurred Cowgill to pursue a new career in technology. He took classes in network administration and eventually landed at a temp agency, expecting to move into the for-profit world. Ironically, his first assignment from the agency was at BHCHP. After a few brief assignments at other places, he found himself back at BHCHP in 1999 and has been there since.

With the organization's move completed, Cowgill's next goal is to bring technology closer to the group's beneficiaries. He is looking at ways to give the area's homeless access to their own medical records, as another step toward improving care.

Cowgill is proof that homelessness can be a temporary stop, rather than a permanent destination. Technology, he said, can help that process, be it through the delivery of information and care or exposure to a potential vocation.

### Renewable Energy Business Network

The Renewable Energy Business Network (REBN), a networking group that has met over the past year in Boston and San Francisco, is going national.

Earlier this week, the group announced several new chapters, including new groups in Austin, Houston, Denver and Seattle. Officials also report a number of other communities could be coming online in the near future, including Los Angeles, New York, Portland, Ore., Washington, D.C. and Israel, which would be the group's first International chapter.

While the group's name and mission -- "to promote the growth of the renewable energy industry" -- sounds awfully close to the [Clean Energy Coalition](#) (CEC), which was formed last fall and boasts a similar membership list, REBN organizers said the two groups overlap very little and will be working together.

"The purpose is to focus on the 'light touch' aspects of business networking and not be competitive with other groups," said Andrew Friendly, a senior associate at [The Clean Technology Center](#) and one of the organizers of the Boston REBN chapter.

To that end, the group is focused on a social networking kind of model, aimed at putting industry insiders together for informal networking events. The group's new site will reflect that, said Friendly, and be a kind of "Craigslist of the clean energy industry."

The CEC co-hosted the group's launch event earlier this week, along with the [U.S. Department of Energy](#) and the [American Coalition on Clean Energy](#)

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