# Transformational Technology: Using **Data** to **Support Children's Success**

## AT A GLANCE

**Organization**
Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City

**Reach**
More than 5,200 "Littles" in all five boroughs

**Challenge**
Outdated database tools prevented the organization from reporting on successful programming and volunteer recruitment.

**Solution**
Innovative Mentoring Software, product of Emergent Software

**Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City & Innovative Mentoring Software**

**All children, regardless of life circumstances, achieve success in their lives.**

It's a powerful concept, and it's the vision at Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City (BBBS of NYC). A mentoring organization serving more than 5,200 children this year, BBBS of NYC has a focused mission: to provide children facing adversity with strong and enduring, professionally supported one-to-one relationships that change their lives for the better, forever.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City started it all. Founded in 1904, BBBS of NYC is the founding agency of the nation's youth mentoring movement. Today, BBBS of NYC >

> serves the children, known as Little Brothers and Sisters, or "Littles," by carefully matching them with caring adult mentors, known as Big Brothers and Sisters, or "Bigs." The role of the agency is to support these mentoring relationships, as well as other mentoring organizations across the nation, providing training and best practices.

## 17 YEARS OLD

BBBS of NYC's database was originally built in 1999 and made reporting a constant struggle.

### Outdated Database Tools Hindered Reporting

By 2016, BBBS of NYC's system of management software, built in SQL in 1999, was outdated. Technology had made leaps and bounds since that time. The

agency's data existed outside of the system in spreadsheets, and staffers built databases on the side, creating silos.

Thousands of children and teenagers in New York City were doing better in school, earning their diplomas and heading to college with the support of their Bigs and BBBS of NYC. The agency knew this. Bigs and staffers heard Littles' stories every day. But, the agency found it difficult to get the right information to represent these Littles fully or tell their stories to the world outside.

The agency knew it could do an even better job of helping children achieve success with better insights into their internal successes, challenges and areas of opportunity. The agency set out to find a system that would not only provide more visibility into existing data, but fresh ways to manage programs and keep volunteers and donors engaged.

### Using Software to Achieve Goals

After a comprehensive search process, BBBS of NYC chose

Innovative Mentoring Software as the solution that would best support their mission. Innovative Mentoring is a cloud-based database system that manages all of an organization's mentoring data and programs. The system was designed specifically for nonprofits by Emergent Software, a software development consulting company based in Minneapolis. Emergent seeks to help these organizations experience technology not as a roadblock, but as a tool to improve their opportunities and to achieve their goals.

BBBS of NYC appreciated that Innovative Mentoring could be scaled and customized for the unique needs of the agency and the children it serves. The Emergent team also understood BBBS of NYC's goals and was willing to continue evolving and improving their system over time, which was critical in deciding to partner.

More specifically, BBBS of NYC saw the following opportunities with Innovative Mentoring:

- Coordinating screenings, trainings, matching and match

supervision with quick access to applications, records, case notes, activities and outcomes

- Doing more with agency data, which can be searched and filtered by any field to help measure progress

- Creating reports and charts that are built into the system as well as customizing the reports that staffers need

- Communicating with Bigs by sending mass emails and creating mailings (that is also captured by the system)

- Integrating the Mentor Portal into a new app for Bigs, making it as easy as possible for them to plan and submit activities in one central location, using a computer or phone.

> **"Our existing database was so old and outdated – kept together by bubble gum and sticks. Nothing was connected and we couldn't provide information about our donors or volunteers. With Innovative Mentoring, access to information is instant and it allows us to create a narrative about our impact on the Littles"**
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> *—Michael Coughlin - Chief Quality Assurance Officer, Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City*

## Seamless Implementation, Immediate Results

In April of 2016, BBBS of NYC launched Innovative Mentoring to great success, moving 10 years of data over to the new system with no errors. Agency staffers and leadership found the Emergent team to be a pleasure to work with throughout the process, which they described as a tremendous relief.

The training and implementation period also went smoothly. Innovative Mentoring is both simple and complex – in all the right ways, according to BBBS of NYC. The system is simple to use; it only took one training for most staffers to understand how to use it. But, everyone at the agency appreciated the complexity of the system's offerings. As one executive observed, once they dug in doors started opening that they didn't

even know existed. There are so many ways to slice the data and use the information in the system.

With the previous system, BBBS of NYC's data limitations meant that they generated static reports, and only once a month. It took halfway into a new month before they had a good grasp on results for the month prior. With Innovative Mentoring, staffers can get information instantly, allowing them to check the agency's "health" at a moment's notice. The agency also built a KPI dashboard that allows anyone to scan the highest-priority metrics, and they can dig down to get a more robust look as needed. Not only can staffers identify issues and find strategic ways to solve them, they can look for opportunities and leverage successes.

BBBS of NYC also has satellite offices across New York City's five boroughs, so the fact that Innovative Mentoring is web-based helped tremendously. Used to a clumsy system that required many staffers to con-

nect remotely, they immediately became more mobile and agile with the new system, whether in the office or out in the community.

## Making a Difference

Perhaps most importantly – for Bigs, for Littles and their families, and for donors – BBBS of NYC can now clearly demonstrate the impact of the work they do together. The agency can now correlate match length, consistency of meetups and mentoring activities with outcome-based metrics like changes in risky behaviors and achievement of goals. Equipped with this perspective, staffers can create fresh narratives and articulate success stories necessary to promote agency programs, recruit and motivate Bigs and Littles, and foster much-needed donor support. It makes all the difference when supporters can see the tangible impact they make on a child's life. Access to complex data like this has also fostered an improvement in program offerings and the development of new tools for mentors to help

enhance the impact of each individual match and the program as a whole.

BBBS of NYC isn't done, however – the agency constantly looks for new ways to expand their system. The database allows them to use technology in a new way, such as an app they are currently developing that will be integrated into the system to support match relationships. The app will serve as a resource for Bigs, connecting them with case workers in real-time, reinforcing goal achievement and sharing photos and other information to help them stay focused as they help their Littles.

The ability to evolve is one key reason BBBS of NYC chose Innovative Mentoring: the system is scalable, and the Emergent team is invested in helping them grow and improve it. Technology is no longer a hurdle – it's an asset that plays a key role in the agency's collaborative efforts to help children achieve success.