

Tech startup launches software for families and children with special needs

Meerkat Village is an innovative platform that empowers families and integrates service provision for children with social, emotional, and behavioral needs.

PITTSBURGH, PA, UNITED STATES, June 29, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- For almost 30 years, Dan Richason has been serving children, youth, families, educators and service providers. Richason's company, System 1-2-3, focuses on facilitating positive outcomes for families and children by building capacity with the people, programs, and systems that serve them. System 1-2-3 facilitators work with numerous organizations in western Pennsylvania, including Pittsburgh Public Schools, Early Learning Resource Center 4, Westmoreland County Behavioral Health, Westmoreland Community Action, Seton Hill Child Services, and accessAbilities.



Meerkat Village brings together adults supporting a child.

Dan's experience serving children has given him unique insight into the challenges of, and opportunities for, navigating systems of care for children with social, emotional and behavioral needs. Never quite satisfied with outcomes for children in need, he convened a group of stakeholders in 2016 and asked, "What if we could do something radically different? What if we could leverage technology to empower families and allow a child's team to communicate across service providers?" The consensus of that meeting was overwhelmingly "count us in" as all knew a vastly different approach was needed because the scale of the challenge was only growing. A 2016 CDC study reported that 1 in 6 children aged 2-8 years has a mental, behavioral or developmental disorder and the numbers are increasing. Even more sobering is that 80% of children who are diagnosed receive no services here in the United States. Of course, there are many children that are undiagnosed. Eventually Dan coined the big idea as "[Meerkat Village](#)" because meerkats exist in highly collaborative communities.

In 2018, Dan Richason met Dr. Crystal Morrison at an UpPrize Competition information session in Pittsburgh. They both described their ideas for the competition, however, after hearing Richason describe his “muddled vision for Meerkat Village,” Dr. Morrison immediately saw the potential because she understood the need deeply. A mother of 3, Dr. Morrison knows the challenges of navigating systems of care for children in need. One of her children was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder over 10 years ago. For years, she’s interfaced with almost 100 different teachers, therapists, specialists, pediatricians, psychiatrists and counselors across multiple states. Dr. Morrison says, “I’ve always been the one communicating between his team of teachers and providers because they don’t talk to each other. Lack of communication isn’t necessarily the fault of teachers and providers. The system is antiquated and doesn’t encourage efficient communication between providers. It’s exhausting, inefficient and I’ve been left frustrated time and time again. Ultimately, it’s my kid that suffers and I just won’t accept that anymore.” From that point, Morrison was devoted to the Meerkat Village concept and helping Richason drive the idea to reality. While they didn’t win the UpPrize Competition in 2018, they powered forward. In 2019, Richason and Morrison worked with a software company to create a functional prototype of Meerkat Village focused on enabling communication and collaboration of adults surrounding a child in need.

Moving the Meerkat Village prototype to a fully functional software product was no small feat. In late 2019, Richason and Morrison partnered with software developers to create a new software company, [Integrated Village](#), to fully develop Meerkat Village. The Integrated Village team is a motley crew of parents, innovators, software developers, scientists and educators with a mission is to leverage technology to promote social and emotional wellness. The team fully realizes that addressing the medical, social, emotional and behavioral needs of children has become increasingly challenging. Parents feel powerless, therapists feel alone and educators may feel like they’ve tried everything. Leveraging technology is one way to address these challenges at scale. Meerkat Village is HIPPA and FERPA compliant. It is unique because it: is designed to empower families and integrate service provision for children with social, emotional and behavioral needs; enables adults to communicate and develop strategies, define and document the use of those strategies on a single page, and collect outcome data with ease; and remains with each family until their child turns 21 at no additional cost.

In April of 2020 the Meerkat Village pilot was released and a mom opened the very first digital village for her 5 yr old child. Less than an hour after opening the village and signing electronic consent forms, the child's early childhood education (ECE) teacher, ECE supervisor, early intervention (EI) teacher, therapeutic staff support (TSS) professional and behavioral specialist consultant (BSC) accepted invitations from the mother and were able to communicate as a team within the software. Start to finish, 52 minutes is unheard of speed for bringing families and professionals together. Dr. Crystal Morrison, Integrated Village CEO says “In the past, it’s taken almost 52 days for me to arrange meetings with my son’s treatment team and teachers. Connecting adults and allowing them to communicate in 52 minutes is revolutionary! Just imagine how that efficiency and effective communication will improve outcomes for children everywhere!” Even more impressive is the family will have access to the virtual village at no

additional charge until the child turns 21. The village will remain a tool and resource as the child grows, independent of transitions in providers, services, schools, locations, etc.

Since launching the full product in 2020, Integrated Village has been working with partners to bring Meerkat Village to children and families. One early adopter and partner is the Early Learning Resource Center Region 4 ([ELRC 4](#)) serving Fayette, Greene, Washington and Westmoreland counties in Pennsylvania. ELRC 4 is leading the charge in using technology to improve the lives of the children and families they serve and purchased the first villages during the launch of Meerkat Village. Lisa Spoonhoward, ELRC Region 4 Director, has been looking for innovative ways to “improve communication between the early childhood and intervention providers” for years. Spoonhoward says that “Meerkat Village certainly addresses the need for better communication and much more.”

Integrated Village is actively seeking new partners and supporters to bring Meerkat Villages to children and families across the United States. If you'd like to know more, checkout www.integratedvillage.io or contact Dr. Crystal Morrison at cmorrison@integratedvillage.io.

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