

Management Innovation: Technology MassHousing's Computer Learning Center Initiative

Beyond bricks and mortar. This catch phrase is one that is used often in the affordable housing arena. Every non-profit – every housing finance agency – truly every housing provider – wants to go “beyond bricks and mortar”. This is the goal – and finding new and expanded ways to do this is something that MassHousing takes very seriously. One example of this is MassHousing's efforts with the Computer Learning Center Initiative.

As part of an effort to improve educational opportunities for the residents of the rental housing it finances, MassHousing has embarked on an initiative to develop computer learning centers within developments located in inner-city neighborhoods. Whenever possible, MassHousing actively encourages developers of low-income housing to provide a computer learning center as part of the programming for each development's community space. Each center is staffed by part-time instructors – often local college or graduate students – and each development's operating budget is underwritten to include funding for the center's staffing and supplies. Currently, there are more than 30 computer learning centers in developments across the state and the number is steadily growing.

For children and teenagers, these centers have proven to be an educational – and fun – way to be involved in constructive after-school activities. Knowing their children are in a safe, supervised setting is very important to parents who are still at work when the school day ends. Many of the computer learning centers also provide evening classes designed to help adults improve their computer and writing skills. For many residents who speak English as a second language, these evening programs are a convenient and inexpensive way to improve their English language fluency and literacy. And for elderly residents, the computers provide an opportunity to learn social networking skills so that they can stay connected with their children and grandchildren.

Thanks to the dedication and creativity of the instructors, with technical assistance from MassHousing staff, the computer learning centers have achieved some very impressive results:

- The evolving art of “digital storytelling” has become very popular at many computer centers. Storytellers young and old are learning to use the latest digital technology to write, direct and edit stories about themselves their families and friends, and their communities. JaModi Robinson, for example, was always interested in making movies. “I was one of those kids who always had a video camera in my hand” he said. He quickly learned how to use the latest digital technology and now, as the director of a computer lab in Boston, JaModi helps other young people express themselves through digital media. He recently worked with the teenagers at the lab who produced a short documentary for a school department meeting and local cable television about the history of that community, public perceptions of their community, and observations about how their community is changing.

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- The computer lab in another Boston development has developed a “music studio” as part of its curriculum. Working in partnership with students from the Berkeley School of Music, young people are learning to write poetry, rap and other forms of music. As they learn to make music digitally, they are also learning the basics of music theory and how to read and write music.
- Working with a learning center in Boston's South End, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has developed an innovative robotics program designed to encourage young people to pursue an education in engineering and science. Each summer, MIT provides intensive training to 15 teenagers at MIT's Robotics Lab and these teenagers, in turn, agree to provide instruction in robotics to 9-and 10-year-old children in their development.
- At the computer learning center in a 1,200-unit development in Worcester, students from Clark University volunteer to tutor children who have failed to pass the state's mandatory educational assessment exam. The program has proven to be highly successful: 98% of the children who have taken the exam a second time received passing scores.
- In Lowell, one of the state's “gateway” cities for immigrants from Southeast Asia, a computer learning center has developed innovative intergenerational programs. Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants improve their English language and computer skills. At the center, young people who are fluently bilingual volunteer to provide instruction to adults.
- In a computer learning center in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, adults are receiving training in medical billing and medical record keeping. Residents who receive training in these areas find many job opportunities because hospitals and health insurers are major employers in Boston.

With a minimal investment in equipment, space and staffing the computer learning centers have evolved in ways that were not imagined when they were first introduced. Each center works with local universities, foundations, employers, and social service agencies to develop unique programs designed to meet the specific needs of each development. Using the universal appeal of computers, each center has greatly enhanced the quality of life and educational and job opportunities for their residents.

These success stories demonstrate what can be accomplished with a clear focus on an important goal. MassHousing's emphasis on these computer learning centers has helped to create these resources – and then the residents themselves are able to carry this effort to the next level.

Accomplishments aren't always just about more dollars spent. Sometimes accomplishments are in establishing priorities and reordered thinking. MassHousing's Computer Learning Center Initiatives are doing just that.