

## **Community Development Resource Centers**

### ***Integrating Technology into Daily Life To Achieve Economic and Quality of Life Outcomes In Rural and Underserved Communities***

#### **Introduction**

Many of our rural communities find themselves struggling to provide economic and quality of life factors for their residents. Resources many times are not being used in an integrated fashion resulting in inadequate programs, program failures or lack of interest from a community. Working together in a cooperative and collaborative manner many communities find that they have hitherto untapped community wealth, both talent and capital. In this short paper you will find an introduction to a holistic approach to community development that focuses coordination and integration of efforts through a community lead and directed Community Development Resource Center. Best described as a synthesis of best practices taken from many resources (listed at the end of the document), the intent of this paper is to get folks to collaborating and cooperating across their communities and the region they live in. Read it and share it. What do you think?

#### **Community Digital Wells**

Just as water is the source and sustenance of life, so too are information, knowledge, and how to access and use it in the new economy. Residents will benefit from a “community digital well,” a shared place to dip into the “waters” of the new economy. Community Development Resource Centers (CDRC’s) can serve as that access point. To date, most initiatives aimed at closing the digital divide have focused on providing underserved and low-income communities with greater access to computers, Internet connections, and other technologies. Yet technology is not an end in itself -- technology without a purpose is worthless!

The real opportunity before our society is to lift our sights beyond the goal of expanding access to technology and instead focus on *integrating* technology into our daily lives to achieve the outcomes we seek: tangible and meaningful improvements in the standard of living of families who are now struggling to rise from the bottom rungs of our economy.

#### **Key Questions**

Our communities now have a remarkable opportunity to marshal the resources and energies that have been summoned to the cause of closing the digital divide to create powerful real improvements in the daily lives of millions of people. The key is for our communities to unite around a new set of aspirations for technology investments in and by underserved and low-income communities. In every case, we must ask the following questions:

- Are we investing in technology for technology's sake, or are we investing with real outcomes in mind?
- Are the intended outcomes only what outsiders think the community might want, or are they in fact what people living there see as top priorities?
- Are we investing with an overzealous faith in the promise of technology, or do we have a realistic appreciation for the challenges underserved and low-income communities face?

- Will our investments simply satisfy our desire to be philanthropic, or will they produce real improvements in people's lives?

## **Cooperation & Collaboration Required**

The disparate interests working to bridge the digital divide can come together and can provide a powerful push to help our communities respond to the opportunities that technology offers underserved and low-income communities.

We can help communities apply technology to speed delivery of vital human services, attract new resources, improve job skills, facilitate neighborhood planning and community organizing, and build learning networks through which people with similar interests can share their diverse experiences.

Technology can spark community change so powerful that it will shatter the status quo. Such change will require much more than access to new tools; it will require a rigorous new focus on outcomes along with smart, large-scale investments to help communities achieve those outcomes.

The measure of our communities' progress in narrowing its fundamental disparities will have little to do with how many computers and Internet connections we install. It will have everything to do with how well we can enable those who are less fortunate to elevate their own lives and the lives of their children.

## **Ten Premises for Moving Forward**

The following 10 premises are provided to stimulate interest in thoughts on how we can meet the challenge head on.

***Premise One:* Focus on Narrowing Social — Not Digital — Divides** It is time to stop focusing so intensively on the technology divide. The real differences we should seek to narrow are America's core *social* divides: the grave disparities in economic opportunity, education, health, safety, housing, and employment.

***Premise Two:* Concentrate on Achieving Concrete Outcomes** Efforts to help low-income communities gain the benefits of technology must be directed toward achieving specific outcomes — in other words, tangible improvements in people's standards of living.

***Premise Three:* Work Through Trusted Leaders in the Community** No matter how impressive the technology or how well-intended the motives, technology initiatives imposed on a community by outsiders are often ineffective.

***Premise Four:* Support Efforts by Communities to Strengthen Their Capacity** The hard truth is that until at least a basic level of community capacity is in place, large-scale technology initiatives have little hope of success.

***Premise Five:* Apply Technology to Help Build Capacity** Once a community has achieved at least a basic level of capacity, technology can be a powerful tool for the next stage of capacity-building efforts.

***Premise Six:* Recognize that Technology Requires Its Own Capacity** Investments in technology must go far beyond funding for hardware, software, and wires.

Premise Seven: **Make the Case for Applied Technology** The truth is that most people, especially those in low-income communities, see little reason to embrace technology.

Premise Eight: **Make Major Changes in Public Policy** Although public officials have been quick to grasp the importance of helping low-income communities participate in the digital revolution, public policies have lagged behind public pronouncements.

Premise Nine: **Dramatically Expand the Availability of Capital** To address a social challenge of this size, the sheer magnitude of available capital must increase exponentially, and that capital must be invested strategically.

Premise Ten: **Dramatically Broaden the Scope of Efforts** Anything less than a massive mobilization of resources, financing, talent, and innovation is destined to produce only incremental and isolated victories.

## **Economic Challenges For Rural Communities**

The nation likes returning to rural America. Every week millions of radio listeners go back to Lake Wobegon to hear the news. They like the reassuring images of Main Street, where the women are strong, the men are good looking, and all the children are above average. Whether the aural art of Garrison Keillor or the printed frame of Norman Rockwell, the nation returns to these rural icons to confirm that all is well in America.

All is not well, however, if the nation looks past the icons to the *real* rural America. Some parts of the countryside are doing well, to be sure. Rural communities nestled in the Rockies of the Intermountain West, for example, are booming as newcomers flock to a scenic lifestyle. But a majority of rural places have not been swept along in the nation's long-running economic expansion.

Put simply, many parts of rural America face a make or break period in the coming years. The challenges are immediate to thousands of rural communities scattered throughout the nation's countryside, but they are also important to the nation. Slightly more than a fifth of the nation's people live in rural America. Rural places make up 97 percent of our nation's space -- places where we grow our food and where we go to play. Did you know that rural America is home to more than 5,000 commercial banks, more than half the nation's total?

Rural America has always faced unique challenges, but the challenges ahead are of a different stripe, in part because the rural economy has moved far beyond agriculture, timber, and natural resources extraction. Moreover, a deep divide in the performance of the rural economy now makes it unlikely that a new tide will lift all rural boats.

Against the backdrop of these rural changes, two challenges will be critical in shaping the rural economic outlook:

- Tapping digital technology and
- Improving human capital.

## **The Role for Community Development Resource Centers**

- CDRC's work to enhance learning opportunities for low-income and other Americans through the use of computers and other technological tools.

- CDRC's serve as a technology resource **and more** in the community; helping businesses, community organizations, and local institutions use technology to strengthen their endeavors and the community as a whole.
- CDRC's reach those who are currently unreached, enhance knowledge and opportunities, provide a needed asset, and strengthen the community. CDRC's also help to develop leaders from the community to speak out in local and state policy debates. CDRC's can also help to educate residents as to the opportunities afforded them through access to high-speed online services. This helps to build the demand necessary to drive infrastructure investment by communications providers on rural and underserved areas.

## **CDRC or CTC?**

It's the "**and more**" that distinguishes CDRC's (Community Resource Development Centers) from CTC's (Community Technology Centers), moving the emphasis to a larger service offering wherein technology has a significant role but is not the sole reason for providing these resources.

## **What is a Community Development Resource Center (CDRC)?**

- A CDRC is a community service, social action, and/or educational facility where computers, related communications technologies, and education programs are available to people who otherwise might have little or no opportunity to use or learn to use these technologies.
- A CDRC may be an independent agency dedicated to this mission; it may be a program within a larger multi-service agency; or it may be a program designed to enhance the overall mission of a service agency with a specialized mission. Each CDRC has its own unique qualities, yet all share a commitment to technology and education access and a belief that a CDRC can be a means for participants to increase their self-sufficiency.
- A successful CDRC offers opportunities to improve education levels, gain job-related skills, develop business management knowledge, and build personal and community capacity.
- It can offer a place where participants gather together and link with the entire community. An important criterion for success will be the degree to which the CDRC becomes an integral part of its community. Participants can and should take part in the planning process and have a real role in directing and sustaining center operations.

## **Learn From Others to Achieve the Promise of Centers**

Best practices taken from the experiences of others tells us what works:

- Centers must tailor their activities and "look and feel" to the unique cultural and economic needs of each community.
- Centers must be deeply involved in their local communities, able to refer families to other organizations for real world needs, to offer joint programs or services with other nonprofits, and to build bridges to employment agencies and employers.
- Centers must build private sector partnerships with technology companies' help to leverage resources in valuable ways.

- There is no cookie cutter or franchise formula. It is essential that each center articulate what it wants to accomplish in its community and then harness the technology to achieve that mission.
- Developing curriculum that supports measurable objectives, figuring out the best way to link participants to jobs, and finding and retaining the right staff provide significant challenges.
- With adequate resources and technical assistance, Centers accomplish more than provide valuable direct services to participants. They serve as a technology resource to public and private entities in the community, meeting a pressing need that otherwise would not have been met.

## CDRC Program Goals

CDRC's can help participants build any number of important academic, business, and life skills, including:

- **Access Goals:** Provide computers and Internet access to a community that lacks these resources, or expand hours of public access to computers.
- **English Language Literacy Goals:** Improve language skills to an immigrant community or a community with historically low English reading and writing skills.
- **Educational Goals:** Improve academic achievement among school-age children, provide GED courses to adults, or adult education.
- **Basic Computer Literacy Goals:** Provide essential skills of computer usage, such as how to turn off the computer or how to use simple desktop tools and the Internet.
- **Advanced Technical Skills/Career Readiness Goals/Business Development:** Teach programming or use of specialized software tools that will offer new career opportunities, provide a suite of programs to assist in job searches and business development, or seminars on business management and leveraging of technology.
- **Community Building/Empowerment Goals:** Strengthen a community through improved communication and/or promoting involvement in local issues.

## Likely Program Areas for a CDRC

Here are just a few possibilities to consider...

- Public Access to computers with Open Lab Time
- Pre-school and Family Activities
- Afterschool Activities
- Adult Education
- Elder Services
- Internet Access (this can be a focus as well as part of other offerings)
- Career Development and Job Preparation
- Job Placement
- Business incubation and nurturing
- Electronic Publishing (including video or multi-media)
- Electronic Commerce

## Who Will Participate? What Are Their Interests?

Every community consists of many different groups of people with a variety of interests.

In the past we have looked primarily to classroom teachers and schools.

In the minds of many responsibility for improving educational opportunity for the least advantaged sectors of our population extends beyond the classroom and the responsibility of only the educational institutions.

Families, faith-based groups, charities, educational institutions, government, and community organizations (e.g., chambers of commerce) each have an important role to play in addressing educational inequalities in our country and in reshaping educational institutions for the future.

It's up to communities to lead this effort on their behalf, as only they know what is in the best interest of their communities.

### **CDRC Service Offerings**

So that residents, small businesses, and not for profits will be better equipped to succeed, the CDRC will offer:

Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of a conference room</li> <li>• Limited office space</li> </ul>
Education Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technology and business skills training</li> <li>• Business education programs and consulting - Marketing, management, Finance/Accounting, Strategic Planning</li> <li>• High speed Internet access – businesses and public</li> <li>• Access to distance learning programs – businesses and public</li> </ul>
Office Equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to computers and software – word processing, spreadsheets, database, presentations, Internet browsers, email</li> <li>• Fax and copier at reasonable rates</li> </ul>
Other Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking opportunities</li> <li>• Introductions to business resources</li> <li>• Information and linkages to funding sources</li> <li>• Light clerical assistance - Telephone Answering, Word Processing, Photocopying</li> <li>• Audiovisual Equipment</li> <li>• Mail box and mailing address</li> <li>• Answering service</li> </ul>

### **Centers and their relationship to business incubation**

- Utilizing the resources offered through a Center seems a reasonable and appropriate use in our small and rural communities.
- Eighty percent of businesses started will not be around at the end of five years.
- Indications are that eighty percent of new businesses started using this Incubator model will be. It's not just for startups.
- About 55 percent of all new jobs arise from the expansions of existing businesses and start-up companies create 45 percent. Start-ups fail at a much higher rate than established businesses.
- Making available these resources, especially the educational and training components, can be a big boon to existing businesses and to growing local economies. Incubator members have free or low-cost access to a wide range of business seminars and programs and free advice on office systems, marketing, growing your business, where to go for financing and many other areas of expertise.

Keeping in mind that this is but one of the functions that Centers can provide (business incubation), consider the possibilities. We know that most businesses started today will fail. What can a small business owner do to increase the odds of success? Let's paint a picture of how a Center and its associated resources might contribute to success.

Reasonably priced space, services, office equipment, group discounts and other services are available so that small businesses will be better equipped to succeed. The objective of the Incubator is to reduce overhead costs and management pitfalls of young businesses during critical early years of operation. This early assistance enhances an entrepreneur's chances for survival and success.

The Center space is provided in a way that best meets the needs of the associates, while allowing for additional space when needed. All of this at a price much lower than traditionally leased space. Access to a conference room is also provided at no charge. Without the concern of exorbitant rent, clerical services and equipment, entrepreneurs and business owners can concentrate on getting their business off the ground and running, making profits and developing new jobs.

The Incubator associates have access to a variety of office equipment: fax, copier and computers. Desks, chairs and other office furniture are also provided. A receptionist is available to greet clients, monitor visitors and assist with clerical needs. Interns from area training centers and the community colleges are also available to assist.

### **Centers and their relationship to not for profit organizations**

Not for profit organizations are increasingly under pressure to leverage resources, to raise funds, and to operate their organizations efficiently and effectively. Technology can provide tools to assist not for profits in their missions. Centers can provide training in the use of tools, access to those tools, and staff to assist not unlike the way in which Centers can help with business incubation and nurturing. Here are a few examples:

#### General technology concepts

Internal uses of computer networks, External uses of computer networks, Local area and wide area networks, Types of software applications, Online service providers, Security

## Education

Refining technology goals and requirements, Developing an agency technology plan, How to link technology to strategy and work processes.

## Use of Database technology

Systems that track people and information about them (volunteers, donors, participants, customers, clients, etc.).

## The Internet

Use the Internet successfully to manage organizations and to attract and keep donors, volunteers and other supporters; using the 'Net to find information and funding leads; how to market an organization online; and more. Managing the web development process, whether or not they will be doing the actual web page design and work or outsourcing the work.

## **CDRC Sustainability**

Bottom line is...you have to have one to “stay alive.”

True sustainability comes from becoming self-sustaining through revenue generating activities.

Use grants for “gap-financing.”

- Revenue possibilities:
- Fees for services
- Space rent
- Sliding scales Grants Donations Corporate partners School district partners

Volunteers -- fill many roles

## **Getting Started...You Gotta Have A Plan**

Strategic planning helps communities identify which strategies offer the most potential to address local needs.

Strategic planning for can help communities to:

- Identify gaps in existing services and educational needs by pinpointing problems that limit economic development, services, or quality of life;
- Help people decide which problems are most important to address first
- Create opportunities for partnerships by identifying common interests Build more broad-based support for Center activities Provide a mechanism to coordinate multiple strategies

A complete strategic-planning process for Centers is comprised of three parts:

- 1) A needs assessment,
- 2) Goal setting to address the most critical issues, and
- 3) Crafting an appropriate action plan.

Advice: Hire a professional facilitator

## **Impacts of Centers**

- An important resource for women and girls, people of all ages, and members of racial or ethnic minorities.

- Offer a range of opportunities to use computers and other technologies in classes as well as in self-directed activities.
- A valuable resource for obtaining job skills and learning about employment opportunities.
- Have a positive effect on participants' educational goals and experiences. Foster a sense of community and personal effectiveness, and allowed real community building to occur.
- A well-used resource for obtaining civic and government information: more than half of center users rated finding out about local events, local government, or state/federal government as important reasons for coming to their center.
- Help to increase users' self-confidence and reduce computer fears and anxieties.
- Participants' overall feelings about their Centers are overwhelmingly supportive.
- Meet resource needs of businesses and not for profits.

## **Starting A CDRC**

The start-up process for a CDRC generally moves through the following steps:

- Form a CDRC Steering Committee to serve as the governing body for the CDRC or as an advisory committee to the agency's existing governance structure.
- Engage in a process of community mapping to identify interests and needs of prospective participants along with assets and strengths available through other community enterprises and community members themselves.
- Form partnerships and develop commitments for assistance from members of the community (e.g., space, volunteers, funding, equipment & furnishings, etc.).
- Research and structure program offerings in response to identified needs and interests (e.g., adult education, after school sessions, job preparation, elder services, family and pre-school programs).
- Initiate a pilot program through which to test the planned programming structure and to further refine conclusions relating to community interest and need.
- Consider and plan for the operational needs of the CDRC (e.g., space, hardware, software, personnel, and resulting financial requirements).
- Develop a business plan mapping the CDRC's operational and financial assumptions so interested parties and founders can buy into the effort.
- Engage in whatever additional fund-raising, space and equipment acquisition, staff and volunteer recruitment is necessary to make the plan operational. NB: Do not plan to start full operations until the Steering Committee is satisfied that the CDRC has sufficient backing to stay in operation for at least 12 months.

## **How Long Will it Take to Create a CDRC?**

The time required to create a CDRC depends upon many variables, such as:

- Staff
- Computers
- Participants
- Space
- Available funds for operations

A CDRC can be established within a shorter time if a supervisor, hardware, and space is readily available.

In general, however, it is likely to take at least a year to establish a CDRC. This timeframe assumes that Steering Committee members have constraints upon their time, such as full-time jobs and families, which means that the time given to the CDRC will be limited.

### Next steps...

- Form a CTC steering committee. Create a project plan.
- Build partnerships. Define outcomes.

### Research Resources

Please note that many have worked hard to assemble their thoughts and approaches on economic and community development. This document does not intend to do anything more than share information and knowledge with the intent to incite discussion and change. If I have inadvertently left out a resource, please understand it was not intentional and you deserve full credit for your efforts. My hope is that I have added value by bringing these ideas together and mingling them with my own. Also, please note that the Web is constantly changing and these links may have gone stale. In that event use a Google search to find resources online. There are many available.

“From Access To Outcomes”, “Venture Philanthropy: The Changing Landscape”, The Morino Institute, <http://morino.org>

“The Organization Of Learning In Community Technology Centers: Learning With Technology In 6 Communities” - SRI International, <http://www.sri.com/policy/ctl/assets/pdfs/vstaera2001.pdf>

Community Technology Centers’ Network, <http://www.ctcnet.org/>

Lone Eagles Consulting, <http://lone-eagles.com/>

TechSoup, <http://www.techsoup.org/articles.cfm?topicid=12&topic=CTC%27s>

Community Learning Centers: Best Practices and Innovations, <http://flconline.org/clctraining/>

“COMMUNITY TECHNOLOGY CENTERS : Keys to Successful Planning, Implementation & Sustainability”, <http://www.ctcnet.org/pub/telecommunity2000/planning.html>

Community Technology Centers Program, <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/CTC/>

HUD’s Neighborhood Networks, <http://www.hud.gov/nw/nwindex.html>

Information Technology Indicators Project, <http://www.cityofseattle.net/tech/indicators/>

“Impact of CTCNet Affiliates: Findings from a National Survey of Users of Community Technology Centers”, <http://www.ctcnet.org/impact98/imp98toc.htm>

AmericaConnects, <http://www.americaconnects.net/>

“Applying the Principles of Youth Development to Youth Opportunity Grants, WIA Formula Funded Programs & Community-Based Youth Programs” - Larry Brown, WAVE, Inc.,

<http://www.waveinc.org/documents/Youth%20Dev%20Principles%20for%20YO%20&%20WIA%20Programs.doc>

“Ten Thoughts for Your New Community Technology Center”,  
<http://www.techsoup.org/articlepage.cfm?articleid=163&topicid=12&CFID=869308&CFTOKEN=53519029>

Meeting A New Century of Challenges In Rural America,  
<http://minneapolisfed.org/pubs/region/99-12/rural.html>