



Latest antipoverty tool: a computer

James L. Tyson (tysonj@csps.com)

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Wednesday, June 9, 1999

WASHINGTON -- From a dark doorway marked by a battered metal sign saying "Market," the neighborhood grocer furnished his "clerks" outside with merchandise too hot for store shelves - heroin and cocaine.

The open-air drug market was once the biggest business around Edgewood Terrace, a Washington public-housing project that until a few years ago was crumbling by the day. But now the pushers are gone, and the store has been renovated into a computer school.

As in Edgewood, people in low-income neighborhoods across the US are starting to seize on computer know-how as a way to pull out of poverty and despair.

"There is a nationwide movement gathering steam for community empowerment via technology," says Phil Shapiro, the District of Columbia coordinator for Community Technology Centers' Network, an organization devoted to bringing computer technology into low-income areas. "It's no longer a little fringe kind of movement."

The spread of high technology into America's poorest quarters is aided by companies that have set up training centers as part of their community-service programs, and by the state and federal governments.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has launched 490 technology centers in poor neighborhoods over the past four years, and 760 more are planned. The Department of Education hopes in the next few years to create 600 similar centers. "We will blanket all of our low-income communities" with technology centers, says Norris Dickard, director of the department's community high-tech program.

In an age when 60 percent of all new jobs require some technology skills, many low-wage Americans also are recognizing that, with a little training and a few mouse clicks, they can leap beyond poverty, prejudice, and isolation of the ghetto.

'Digital apartheid'

Still, poor neighborhoods have far to go before they close the "digital divide" with well-off Americans. The Commerce Department reported last July that the "technology gap" among races and classes is growing.

Barriers are high to the spread of technology among the poor, extending beyond scant schooling and funding. The racial gap in high-tech opportunities fuels claims of a "digital apartheid."

But for people who are ready and able, the leap to computers and the Internet can be exhilarating - even liberating.

"Technology training brings hope into someone's life," says Mr. Shapiro. "I've seen people who have developed high-tech skills gain a renewed enthusiasm for living because they are less disenfranchised."

Technology can help dispel despair by giving users a sense they can shape their future. It opens up opportunities in education and jobs, experts say. And it can help bolster household incomes and families.

But access to high-tech can also boost the community at large. By moving people out of idleness, computer training and resulting jobs can help reduce crime, says Charlie Famuliner, national field director for HUD's Neighborhood Networks program. Consequently, some landlords at low-income apartments have started technology centers at their own expense.

People who bring technology to poor neighborhoods insist that a little of training goes a long way. It's not unusual for residents, after less than a year of computer training, to go from joblessness or minimum-wage labor to steady work at \$30 an hour, say experts.

Sharon Pringle's story

Take Sharon Pringle. Since completing a five-month software course at Edgewood Terrace, Ms. Pringle has tripled her former wage to \$17.60 an hour.

The single mother of two has withdrawn an application for public aid. She has also quit low-pay, day-labor construction work and gained job security, full benefits, and self-confidence by landing a full-time salaried job at the State Department.

"The computer class helped me get my first government job," says Pringle. "It helped turn my life completely around."

The jump of Edgewood's first graduates from class to computer jobs in 1995 energized the neighborhood. "It sent a shock wave through the community," says Knox McIlwain of the Community Preservation and Development Corporation (CPDC). "All of a sudden people said, 'There is a possibility here, look what they did, that's incredible,' and the connection between technology and renewal was dramatically made."

Like many new low-income computer users, Pringle needed encouragement to begin and finish her training. Her seven-year-old daughter introduced her to computers, helping her overcome a sense of intimidation.

At one point, Pringle dropped out to take a second job. But urged on by the school director, she interviewed at the State Department, finished the course, and began work last August.

Pringle's on-and-off embrace of computers shows that for new technology to take hold in poor neighborhoods, promoters of technology must use old, hands-on methods in social work.

"Computer experts tend to look at wiring and software, but we don't realize how much of the old, face-to-face things you have to do," says Bish Sanyal, a professor of city planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge.

Indeed, CPDC staff provide courses for free or at a pittance. They paper over the neighborhood in promotional fliers. And they try to lure residents to introductory meetings with supermarket coupons. Still, many residents stay away, so classroom space goes to outsiders.

Even so, Edgewood's digital devotion is hard to overlook. One recent evening, as several children roughhoused in a carpeted entryway, middle-age residents and their instructor crammed a classroom, riveted to more than a dozen PCs.

A 'wired' community

The Edgewood project and other initiatives in Washington typify the computer efforts springing up in poor communities nationwide. At Edgewood, every apartment will be wired to the Internet and a neighborhood Web site. Another local effort moves mothballed, federally owned PCs out of warehouses and into homes.

Once entirely wired, Edgewood will use the Internet as its front stoop, enabling residents to easily learn of local goings-on, find shared interests, and together satisfy neighborhood needs, say CPDC staff.

Already, technology and the prospect of a close community have attracted new residents who might otherwise shun a place that was once called "Vietnam."

Erika Lomax, a Washington native and recent University of Virginia graduate, moved to Edgewood last September. With Internet communication, "there is a closeness," says Ms. Lomax, a city school administrator. "Hopefully we'll have more people at community events and more people taking a leadership role and not just paying rent."

© Copyright 1999 The Christian Science Publishing Society.
All rights reserved.