

Stewartown plugs in to high-tech e-village

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Since November, Emily Hill has said goodbye to a mile-long walk to the library, extensive lines at the computer desk and time limits on Internet searches for work or social services. SNUG, a new computer membership group for Stewartown residents, has changed her life, she said.

"Having a computer has opened up so many doors for everybody," she added. "I think SNUG can pull the whole community together."

Stewartown received a \$500,000 federal grant in 2002 to turn the public housing townhouse community, which is owned and managed by the Housing and Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County, into a revolutionary "e-village," Stewartown.Net.

All 95 housing units are wired for T1 Internet access, and residents can receive a computer and services for \$25 a year and a \$50 deposit, said Christopher Goett, program coordinator of Stewartown Homes for the Community Preservation and Development Corp. (CPDC), a nonprofit public agency.

CPDC developed the project, which started in November, as a way to spread technology's advantages to low-income individuals, Goett said. Stewartown is one of three "e-villages" that CPDC has created since 1995.

"Technology provides life-long learning," Goett added. "This is a way to close the digital divide gap for the working class."

Rasheita Turner agrees. She and her three children need to take turns using their computer now that they added the Stewartown.Net software. Turner served on the resident founding board and was the first to sign up for the program, she said.

"In this day and age, it's just absolutely necessary to have a computer," Turner said. "My kids, especially, need to have that kind of advantage."

Stewartown residents, CPDC, and an array of community partners, including the office of U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D) of Baltimore, joined together to apply for the grant and develop the program, Goett said.

Residents who are interested in the program attend an orientation class that teaches them how to use the thin client computer, which has no hard memory but does have Internet access and an external floppy drive. Microsoft Office 2000 and other software are provided through the network. Those who receive a computer automatically become members of the Stewartown.Net Users Group Inc. (SNUG Inc.), which was formed to guide and determine how the technology can improve the community, Goett said. SNUG has 135 members, with computers installed in about 45 household, he added.

Turner was recently voted president of SNUG, a position she can't wait to fill.

"My goal is to get everyone in Stewartown excited about this project," she said. "I don't want anyone -- anyone -- to be afraid of the computer."

SNUG's official site, Stewartown.Net, is a Web-based Intranet system that residents can use to communicate, access social services and learn about health care and community resources. The cable and wiring is designed so that residents can only work with CPDC's network, said Ben Freedman, a CPDC employee who does technical support for the program.

SNUG's first project, Turner said, will involve setting up a resident message board on the site so members can talk to one another and share ideas and information. SNUG also plans to hold workshops about how to use the computer to help with finances or to start a business, she said.

"We brought the 21st century into many peoples homes," she added, "who couldn't otherwise afford it,"

Twenty-year-old Eischeena Jones said having a computer was a far-fetched dream until this program started. She searches the 'Net for hours at a time, mostly researching information about college.

"This is about opportunity," Jones said, noting that her younger sister used the computer for her eighth grade science project, and her 7-year-old brother practices reading games on it. "It's an investment in everybody's future."