

Center in Capital Called a Success in Spanning the Technology Gap

By RAJU CHEBIUM
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WASHINGTON -- If she had not contacted the Gateway computer training center, Patricia Fisher would still be on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Ms. Fisher, a 26-year-old single mother, would still be earning minimum wage at Starbucks, relying on food stamps and rental assistance, and wondering how to provide a better life for herself and her 5-year-old son, Michael.

Now, after completing a free three-month office technology program at Gateway, Ms. Fisher earns more than twice her previous salary. And she wants to finish high school and go to college to pursue a career in the booming information technology field.

"I used to cry all the while and say, 'What am I going to offer this child?' " said Ms. Fisher, who works as a telephone receptionist at Abt Associates, a government and policy research firm in Bethesda, Md., a Washington suburb. "When I went into this program, it supported me 100 percent. And that was what made me move on with my life."

Ms. Fisher is one of 180 low-income Washington residents who have gained the skills to enter the modern workforce at Gateway, a community and job-training center run by a nonprofit real-estate group in Bethesda called Community Preservation and Development Corp. CPDC is also wiring all 800 units at Edgewood Terrace, a low-income housing community in the northwest section of Washington the company owns and where Gateway is situated, and aims to install computers in every apartment by 2002.

"This is beyond access, this is control," said Leslie Steen, president of CPDC. "Residents who have control of the technology will end up having control of the community."

"I think in a wired community," she added, "you'll see civic change, you'll see civic activity."

At a time when President Clinton has proposed new nationwide efforts to span what he calls the digital divide between technology haves and have-nots, CPDC's approach to lift people out of poverty has drawn praise from federal officials.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development has touted Edgewood Terrace as an example of how residents, private groups and businesses must work together to improve communities from the ground up. Charlie Famuliner, who heads HUD's Neighborhood Networks



Community Preservation and Development Corporation

The Gateway center at Edgewood Terrace in Washington.

Initiative, calls Edgewood Terrace the "Cadillac" of the nation's 600 or so community development programs.

Edgewood Terrace could win more notice in the coming years because of its success in bridging the technology gap.

In this year's State of the Union address, the President said the administration was considering a program to offer \$50 million in grants to communities that are helping residents get online, part of a \$2.3 billion initiative to expand computer use.

The computer industry is also interested in narrowing the technology gap. Silicon Valley executives, in a meeting with presidential aides in December, pushed a plan called ClickStart, which would allow people to buy hardware and Internet access through federal vouchers.

CPDC bought Edgewood Terrace in 1991 to renovate a community that was once called "Little Beirut" because of crime and drugs. Officials quickly realized that merely tearing down homes and building new ones would not do. What was needed, said Al Browne, a CPDC vice president in charge of Edgewood, was a way to help people earn more. The idea is a prosperous community will not fall victim to social ills.

"You cannot change communities by brick and mortar alone," he said.



Community Preservation and Development Corporation

Patricia Cox, left and Zack Rosenberg teach a class, with Bolo Sukruat, at the computer.

In 1995, CPDC turned to federal housing officials to establish a job-training center at Edgewood Terrace. HUD gave a \$1.2 million grant. Then Microsoft donated software worth the same amount.

"Corporate America is not great at managing social programs," said Chris Roberts, business development manager for Microsoft's mid-Atlantic region office, who has worked with Gateway since the start. "At the same time, we have a social responsibility."

Other partners soon came aboard: Dell and other companies donated computers; Bell Atlantic gave \$500,000 to train people for customer-service jobs; Beacon House Ministries established after-school programs; Catholic, Georgetown and other Washington universities offered to help.

Today, about 80 District of Columbia residents take classes any given day in the modern classrooms of the Gateway center, which resembles a small conference center.

People learn how to use software such as Microsoft Office, Word and Excel. Teenagers can take entrepreneurship classes at the Georgetown business school. A program that teaches Web design skills is being revamped. Gateway offers one-on-one tutoring for those who wish to take the GED exam. Younger children are taught how to use computers.

Gateway even teaches residents the basics of surviving in the working world, like how to dress, how to conduct oneself and the importance of punctuality. Finally, CPDC helps students find jobs. Though students pay little or nothing, they must volunteer for at least 25 hours at Edgewood Terrace or elsewhere.

Browne said about 70 percent of the students are on welfare and many of them are single mothers. Running Gateway costs nearly \$2 million annually; wiring Edgewood Terrace to the Internet and putting in computers costs an additional \$2 million each year. CPDC bears the cost and also gets some private foundation money and public funds from the District of Columbia.

HUD no longer provides money for neighborhood network centers, but offers advice and other assistance, Famuliner said.

He and CPDC officials emphasized that no program will work if the community is not involved. Residents of Edgewood Terrace are so involved that Ms. Fisher and about 15 other residents have formed an advisory board to help CPDC plan and carry out programs step by step.

Ms. Steen, the CPDC president, said she envisioned a time when the residents become so self-reliant that they can take over Gateway. That is fine by her, because such a move would mean that the community is in charge of its economic future.

"Our goal is to work ourselves out of a job," she said.



Community Preservation and Development Corporation

Nina Abya, left, talks with a client from behind the registration desk at the Gateway Learning Center.
