



NETWORK

Neighborhood Networks



U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development • Office of Multifamily Housing Programs • www.NeighborhoodNetworks.org

A Message from

**U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
Secretary Shaun Donovan**



While previously serving at HUD, I witnessed the impact the Neighborhood Networks Initiative can have on the lives of residents in the community. With more than 1,400 Neighborhood Networks centers located throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Neighborhood Networks Initiative has truly lived up to its promise of “Delivering Technology Access to America’s Communities.”

President Obama and I understand the transformative power of technology and believe that all Americans are entitled to have access to it. By expanding access to technology, as well as offering a variety of innovative programs and services, Neighborhood Networks centers play a key role in increasing self-sufficiency and improving the quality of life for residents.

The progress and strength of Neighborhood Networks can be directly attributed to the cadre of people who dedicate their time, energy, and talent to it. Neighborhood Networks center staff, volunteers, residents, property owners and managers, and HUD staff are vital to the success of the Initiative. I applaud their efforts and congratulate each and every one of them on their achievements. I look forward to meeting many Neighborhood Networks stakeholders in the future and contributing to the vision of this great effort.

It Helps to Have ESP in Today’s Job Market

Whether the economy is thriving or struggling, it can be an intimidating process to enter the workforce or pursue career advancement. However, Neighborhood Networks centers can minimize the stress associated with obtaining employment or career success by offering workforce development programs that equip residents with the skills and confidence they need to compete in today’s job market.

Offering a Complete Package

To succeed, job candidates and current employees must possess a well-rounded background that includes education, skills, and professionalism (ESP). Specifically, job candidates and current employees must offer:

- **Education.** A 2007 U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics survey supports this concept, indicating that full-time workers who possess a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) experience a 4.4 percent unemployment rate compared to a 7.1 percent unemployment rate for those who do not.
- **Skills.** While education may help job candidates get their foot in the door, their skills will keep them there. It is important for jobseekers to assess their skill set, and pursue jobs that utilize these skills. If jobseekers do not possess a strong skill set, they should seek training classes that expand their skills. In today’s technology-driven job market, possessing basic computer skills is a necessity.
- **Professionalism.** Studies show that hiring managers make a decision about a job candidate within the first few seconds or minutes of the interview. Because of this, first impressions are critical, and job candidates must immediately present themselves in a professional manner.

Help Is Here

This issue of *Network News* spotlights some of the successful workforce development programs being conducted by centers to help residents improve their employability and achieve their career goals.

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Offering Residents a Second Chance at Education and Success

An unexpected family crisis. A financial need to obtain a full-time job. The desire to withdraw from school and enter the world of work. These are just some of the reasons why more than 35 million people ages 18 or older did not earn their high school diploma. For these individuals, the General Educational Development (GED) offers a second-chance opportunity to create a solid education foundation upon which they can build a brighter future. Individuals who obtain a GED:

- Can further their education by enrolling in an institution of higher education or a specialized training program. According to the Annual Survey of Colleges 2007, 98 percent of colleges and universities that require a high school diploma accept the GED credential. This is good because the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that seven of the top 10 fastest-growing occupations during the years 2006–2016 will require a postsecondary vocational award-certificate or an associate, bachelor, or professional degree.
- Earn higher annual salaries than individuals who do not possess a high school diploma. The U.S. Census Bureau's 2007 American Community Survey estimates that individuals ages 25 or older who possess a high school diploma or equivalent earn an average yearly salary of \$26,894 compared to \$19,405 for those who do not have one. Furthermore, people who continue their education and receive an associate degree generally earn \$32,874 a year, while those possessing a bachelor's degree earn an average annual salary of \$46,805.

About the GED

Comprised of five content area tests (language arts/writing, language arts/reading, social studies, science, and mathematics), the GED test assesses adult learners' high school-level of academic knowledge and skills. To take the test, an individual must not be enrolled in or have graduated from high school, must be over the age of 16, and must meet state requirements. To successfully pass the test, a test-taker must earn a minimum total standard score of 2,250 on all five tests and a minimum standard score of 410 on each content area test. The time required to complete the GED exam is seven hours and five minutes.

Preparing Residents to Pass

Through partnerships with local institutions and organizations, Neighborhood Networks centers are offering GED preparation classes, making it easier for residents to seize their second chance at an education and success.

The **Garrison Woods Neighborhood Networks Computer Training Center in Stafford, Virginia**, has teamed with Rappahannock Area Regional Adult Education to offer a GED preparation class. For the class, which meets every Monday and Wednesday from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., Rappahannock Area Regional Adult Education provides the instructors and all of the materials.

"In the three years since we started the class, we have had about seven or eight individuals successfully complete the exam and receive their GED," reported Pamela Curtis, social services coordinator and computer facilitator of the Garrison Woods Neighborhood Networks Computer Training Center. "Many of these individuals obtained their GED so they could earn a degree or certificate at one of the local community colleges. We had a set of twins, Christina and Crystal Greene, who attended the class and earned their GEDs together. They are currently enrolled at Germanna Community College where they are studying business administration. To further encourage residents to continue their education, Interstate Realty Management Compa-

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Christina (left) and Crystal (right) Greene proudly display their certificates of achievement at the GED graduation ceremony hosted by Rappahannock Area Regional Adult Education. The twins are pictured here with fellow Garrison Woods Apartments resident and GED graduate Jessica Rodriguez.

ny, the property management company that operates Garrison Woods, offers a scholarship program. Residents who apply and are accepted to college or a trade/professional school are eligible to receive a scholarship that covers tuition and books. The twins were able to attend Germanna Community College because of this scholarship.”

To further help residents obtain their GED, Rappahannock Area Regional Adult Education agreed to pay the exam fee for Garrison Woods residents in exchange for the use of center space as part of the partnership agreement.

In **Lufkin, Texas**, Eva Lynch, center director of the **Pinewood Park Learning Center**, teamed with Angelina College to restart the center’s GED preparation class that

was cancelled in 1996 due to lack of participation. “When I accepted the position of center director in January 2008, I made it a goal to launch a GED class,” explained Lynch. “To increase participation, I opened the class to residents and community members, and promoted it on a local television station’s community events announcements, with the Texas Department of Human Services and Texas Workforce Solutions, and in the local newspaper. The class size continues to grow, and we currently have eight adults studying to take the GED exam.”

Angelina College provides all of the instructors and materials for the class that meets every Wednesday and Thursday from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. If a resident is unable to pay the cost of the GED exam, the Lufkin Adult Learning Center, Inc., a local nonprofit organization, pays the test fee with funds provided by the United Way of Angelina County.

“Since we started the program in May 2008, we have already had one resident pass his test with flying colors,” said Lynch. “Currently, he is working at a local factory, but in January 2009, he will be a student at Angelina College studying for a career in physical education. Angelina College is offering him financial aid to make it possible for him to attend full time and take care of his four-year-old son. We also have another student, a mother of three, who is ready to take her test. She has extensive accounting experience, and has been asked to apply for a number of jobs that would advance her career. However, she needs her GED to pursue them.”

A Snapshot of 2007 GED Graduates

Since the GED exam was established in 1943, 17 million people have passed the exam. In 2007:

- Of the 635,182 GED candidates who took all five content area tests, more than 451,000 people (or 71 percent) passed all five tests.
- The average age of GED graduates was 24 years old.
- Fifty-eight percent of GED graduates were male, and 42 percent were female.
- The average number of years out of school for GED graduates was seven years.

Source: American Council of Education, GED Testing Service.

Preparing Residents to Compete in the Local Job Market

‘**W**orkforce development’ is a broad term that often includes any education, training, and preparation that helps individuals to obtain and maintain a job. A comprehensive workforce development program also takes into consideration the skills sought by employers and ensures that individuals are equipped with these skills so that they may compete for local jobs.

Nationwide, Neighborhood Networks centers are delivering workforce development programs that help residents further their education, develop and enhance their basic skills, and succeed in the workplace. While many Neighborhood Networks centers offer residents informal workforce development support, such as basic computer skills, resume writing, and interview skills training, many other centers partner with local organizations and institutions to offer more in-depth workforce development programs. This article showcases how two Neighborhood Networks centers are preparing center users to meet the challenges of today’s changing workforce.

Washington, DC Center Offers a Mobile Solution

In **Washington, DC**, it was the center staff’s goal to help young residents envision a future beyond their neighborhood that served as the driving force behind the creation of **The Pentacle Group Neighborhood Networks Center’s** workforce development program. “We know that the poor economic climate in which the children live is negatively affecting their outlook on life,” explained Janice Ellis, assistant center director. “Our goal is to improve the socioeconomic status of the children by helping their parents further their education or improve their skill set so they are able to qualify for better paying jobs. By helping their parents achieve and succeed, we hope to break the cycle of underachieving and demonstrate to the children that it is possible for them to dream and achieve as well.”

As part of its workforce development program, the center acts as an intermediary between residents and the District of Columbia (DC) Department of Employment Services mobile job van. A 38-foot, handicapped accessible, mobile computer classroom, the job van visits the center twice a month. In addition to providing access to 13 state-of-the-art, Internet-ready computers, the van offers the expertise of a literacy counselor and a case manager who



The District of Columbia (DC) Department of Employment Services’ mobile workforce development van visits The Pentacle Group Neighborhood Networks Center twice a month.

assist with job searches and training, provide information on apprenticeship programs, connect individuals with employment banks, provide lists of current job vacancies, help with the completion of applications, and help register individuals with the DC Department of Employment Services.

“Sometimes people are put off about going to local government employment offices,” reported Ellis. “The mobile van is more convenient, less intimidating, and more accessible. Once residents use the services offered by the mobile job van, they use the center for follow-up services, such as checking on the status of a resume or preparing a resume if they obtain a lead on a job. At the center, we guide them to resume-writing sites and show them how to navigate job sites.”

Skills and Support Are Secret to Philadelphia Center’s Success

In **Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**, the **Center Post Neighborhood Networks Computer Training Center’s** computer training program and Pennsylvania CareerLink service are helping center users enhance their employment skills, find jobs, or further their careers.

During the 13-week computer training program, participants develop, strengthen, and master their skills in Microsoft Office; learn how to navigate the Internet; and use e-mail. During this course, Center Director Gloria Finney and her staff review participants’ resumes and help them to focus on the job or career that they wish to

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pursue. Individuals who enroll in the center's computer training course must enroll in Pennsylvania CareerLink at www.cwds.state.pa.us.

"Pennsylvania CareerLink is a one-stop resource that connects businesses with qualified people, and people with training, jobs, and careers," said Finney. "We've been affiliated with Pennsylvania CareerLink as a Community Outreach Center since March 2008. Through our relationship with Pennsylvania CareerLink, we conduct workshops to encourage the participants along their career path, help them to identify their skills, and refine their resumes."

If residents or center users are interested in career assistance, such as finding a job, looking for a better job, improving job skills, or seeking vocational training, Pennsylvania CareerLink enables them to search for job openings, create a resume, apply for jobs online, research career information, access labor market information, and learn about financial aid and training.

"Through our workforce development program, residents have greatly expanded their horizons," stated Finney. "With our support and guidance, one resident was able to start her own business, and quite a few others have found more lucrative jobs and moved on to other programs of higher education."

Michigan Center Does Its Part to Reduce Unemployment

The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics' September 2008 unemployment figures reported Michigan as having the second highest unemployment rate of all 50 states and the District of Columbia, narrowly escaping the top spot by a mere .1 percent. To help residents deal with Michigan's economic downswing and compete in the state's tight job market, Leona Patterson, center director of the **Lancaster Computer Learning Center in Pontiac, Michigan**, launched a workforce development program. By partnering with Michigan Works! and other resources, the Lancaster Computer Learning Center is able to offer a structured workforce development program that helps adults and youth identify, develop, and strengthen their employment and vocational skills and increase job opportunities.

"We offer a wide range of services that residents can tap into," explained Patterson. "We provide assistance with preparing for the General Educational Development (GED) exam; a six-session workshop that helps people reduce the barriers to employment or enrollment in post-high school training and college programs; and Internet access to file unemployment claims, conduct job searches, transmit resumes to prospective employers, download government forms, complete financial aid forms, and search for scholarships."

In addition to these onsite services, the center also oversees the intake process for Michigan Works! programs. When residents visit the center for guidance on finding a job or returning to school, Patterson and center staff conduct a comprehensive interview and career assessment with them. Once this assessment is completed, the individuals are referred to Michigan Works! for follow-up services.

Michigan Works! offers a wide range of employment, training, and career education services designed to help employers find skilled workers and to help jobseekers find satisfying careers. The programs are also designed to prepare youth and unskilled adults for entry into the labor force and help individuals who face serious employment barriers obtain the assistance necessary to get and keep a job.

"At Michigan Works!, center users register online, conduct job searches using its job bank, and post their resumes for job vacancies," described Patterson. "They then use the center's resources to check on the status of their job application, review vacancies, and monitor other job-related issues. Lancaster, where we are located, does not offer immediate access to public transportation, making it difficult for residents to get to a Michigan Works! location. Being able to use the center's computers eliminates the transportation barrier for residents."

For centers wishing to create their own workforce development program, Patterson has this piece of advice: "When establishing a workforce development program, it is important to help residents obtain or improve the skills that local employers are seeking. This not only enables residents to compete in the local job market, but also builds a stronger partnership between your center and local employers."

Small Businesses, Big Contributions

Four point five million. That is the number of new jobs the Association for Enterprise Opportunity (AEO) estimates were created by microenterprises between 2000 and 2005. The AEO also reports that microenterprises, which are defined as businesses with five or fewer employees that require initial capital of \$35,000 or less, also recycle significantly more money back into the community compared to large companies. Without question, microenterprises play an important role in maintaining local economies and supporting their members.

By providing microenterprise development programs, Neighborhood Networks centers encourage residents to establish their own businesses, take control of their financial future, and become self-sufficient. Moreover, center microenterprise programs help to strengthen and expand the entrepreneurial activities that already exist in these neighborhoods. **Lavergne Court Learning Center** in **Chicago, Illinois**, and **Friendship Village Neighborhood Networks Center** in **Kansas City, Missouri**, are two Neighborhood Networks centers that are supporting microenterprises that are helping adult residents earn an income and teaching center youth valuable lessons about entrepreneurship.

Center Microbusiness Program Benefits Residents of All Ages

The Lavergne Court Learning Center's microbusiness development programs are helping residents of all ages see that self-sufficiency really does start with oneself. The center offers three microbusiness development programs that not only enable adult residents to generate income and learn valuable workforce development skills, but also empower young residents to achieve their goals.

Of the three microbusiness development programs established by the Lavergne Court Learning Center, the one that has been in existence the longest is the center's eight-year community garden project. On a half-acre plot of land donated by a local nonprofit organization, residents plant, weed, and harvest collard greens, cucumbers, kale, onions, eggplant, zucchini, potatoes, tomatoes, and cabbage, which are then sold to a local restaurant.

"We view the community garden as a farm on a much smaller scale," explained Rose Mabwa, center director for the Lavergne Court Learning Center. "It takes a great

deal of work and knowledge to be a successful farmer. To grow the best products, residents must understand soil composition and the importance of soil testing and keeping topsoil healthy. With this information, they can consistently harvest fresh, top-quality produce that local businesses will want. They can also apply the skills, experience, and knowledge they learned through the program to start their own business that uses produce from their plot of the community garden. Also, having their produce purchased by a top-rate local restaurant helps residents realize firsthand the importance of providing a good product and the rewards of hard work."

The Lavergne Court Learning Center's community garden microbusiness development program also includes a youth component that helps young residents acquire gardening and entrepreneurial skills and knowledge. For the youth community garden project, youth grow a variety of herbs that are dried and combined with rice to create Jambalaya mix that is sold throughout the community. The youth also grow a variety of flowers that are dried and then combined with natural oils and glycerin to make aromatic soap, which is sold in the local community.

Mabwa estimates that the adult community garden generates about \$600 each year, while the Jambalaya mix business earns about \$200 a year, and the soap business brings in about \$100. All of the profits are invested back into the program.

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Youth from the Lavergne Court Learning Center tend the community garden that contains a variety of vegetables and herbs that are sold to support the center's microbusiness development program.

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In 2007, the Lavergne Court Learning Center launched its second microbusiness development program, a seven-week computer refurbishing course that teaches participants how to troubleshoot, diagnose, and fix computer problems. Working in small groups, participants completely disassemble a computer, examine each part, learn how each component contributes to the computer's functions, and then reassemble the computer. Students who complete this course are eligible to continue on to the center's advanced computer class that offers in-depth training in Microsoft Office and Web design.

"Often times, small business owners also serve as their company's IT [information technology] department," said Mabwa. "Knowing how to fix their own computers enables them to keep their new businesses up and running. The courses also equip participants with the skills needed to generate income. For example, after completing our computer class, one of our residents—an 83-year-old cancer survivor—obtained the skills and confidence to launch his own Web-based business selling homeopathic medicines online. His online business supplements his retirement income, but more importantly, it lifts his spirits to know that he can use technology to his advantage. We also have about five residents who are using their new skills to earn additional income as computer consultants."

The center's latest microbusiness development program was created in the summer of 2008. The program started out as a summer activity, but turned into a microenterprise. "To offer the young residents a positive, productive, and enriching activity that would give them an alternative to just hanging out all summer, we launched a digital storytelling program," described Mabwa. "We equipped the youth with cameras and voice recorders and had them interview local officials and leaders. The youth were tasked with asking these community leaders questions of concern to them, such as what was the individual's viewpoint on drugs, crime, or education."

The youth then transformed their interviews into digital stories that were compiled onto a CD. Community response to the CD was overwhelmingly positive, and the youth decided to package, market, and sell the CD to schools, organizations, and businesses. The CD is currently being sold throughout the community for \$5 each.

Missouri Center Plants Seeds of Entrepreneurism

Nine years ago, the Friendship Village Neighborhood Networks Center launched the Youth Entrepreneurial Initiative to help young residents obtain the necessary skills that would enable them to be self-sufficient later in life. For one project, the youth were tasked with starting their own business. After much discussion, the youth decided to start a salsa business that would allow them to make good use of the overabundance of vegetables from the property's community garden.

Center staff then scheduled a tour of the manufacturing facility of The Original Juan, a local supplier and bottler of specialty foods. During the tour, the youth were presented with the possibility of having their salsa manufactured through a private label bottling program at the factory. The youth voted to move forward with the business venture, and named their product Sassy Salsa from the Village. The youth also designed a label, secured financing for inventory, planned marketing tactics, and determined how to spend the profits.

Today, Sassy Salsa from the Village produces approximately 500 jars of salsa a year. Costing \$2 to produce and selling for \$6 a jar, the microenterprise generates a comfortable profit that is put back into youth programs at the center. The salsa is sold locally at farmer's markets and at housing and social services conferences.

"Sassy Salsa has led to the creation of a line of products," reported Kimber Myers Givner, executive director of Phoenix Family Housing Corporation, the nonprofit organization that operates Friendship Village Neighborhood Networks Center. "We now sell sugar scrubs, body lotion, stationery, a youth-produced magazine, and a calendar. All of the proceeds go toward sustaining programs that support our programs. It has been an amazing journey that has taught our youth so much."

The programs highlighted in this issue of *Network News* are just some of the many ways that Neighborhood Networks centers are equipping residents with education, skills, and professionalism. For more information, contact the centers featured in this article. You can also learn more about workforce development programs being offered at centers across the country at www.NeighborhoodNetworks.org.

