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Friendship House adds new technology center

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Ten years ago, it might have been possible to land a good job without basic computer skills. In the not-too-distant future, computer competence will probably be required for even entry-level jobs.

"It's a 21st-century skill," said Erika Willis, director of operations at Friendship House of Christian Service. "You fall way behind if you don't jump on the boat."

Sitting in the heart of the South Side, Billings' lowest income area, employees and volunteers at the nonprofit community center see first-hand the technology gap that will make their neighbors less competitive in a computer-driven world.

"People don't have computers, or if they do, they may not be online or they don't have a mouse, or their e-mail isn't working," she said.

Top that off with a perception that the electronic world is more complicated than it is.

"Computers are so intimidating to people," she said.

Julie Durrett, executive director of Friendship House, recognized an unmet need two years ago and set out to establish a new onsite Community Technology Center.

With the help of Montana State University Billings, 22 laptop computers were purchased for the center, and a new room was added to Friendship House with the help of volunteers and donors.

"We just completed the addition in the last few weeks," Willis said. "It was built on Saturdays with volunteer labor. We had incredible volunteers."

Covering costs

Donations and fund-raising projects covered some of the cost.

First to use the computers were children in after-school programs. Three days a week, they are in the computer center learning the basics of word processing and keyboarding.

They use computers for homework and to communicate with other children around the country working on Worldworks, a science, technology, engineering and math program.

With the wireless computer room nearly complete, Friendship House now wants to bring parents and neighbors in to get comfortable with computer use to enhance their job skills.

"What people need is the confidence and ability to know they can do it," Willis said.

Friendship House won't be offering advanced programs, just basic skills that will help get people ready for the next step - a college class, a certification program or a job, she said.

"We want to get people in the door," she said. "Our goal is to have it accessible to the whole community."

Friendship House has established itself as a safe, comfortable place, Willis said. People intimidated by the prospect of a college class or who had bad experiences in their school days will be more at home in their community. With a little help in building computer skills and a little support, students may be more likely to make the leap to advanced programs, she said.

"I know there are many underemployed people in the community," she said. "All they need is a few skills."

There are lots of jobs in the current economy and employers willing to train them if they have basic skills, Willis said.

A community center coordinator has just been hired at Friendship House and should be on board by April 1. One of his first tasks will be to put together an advisory committee for the center. The committee, including neighbors and representatives of some of the social programs that partner with Friendship House, will try to identify what the community needs and wants.

Volunteers needed

Willis envisions structured classes, informal groups and open-access hours as part of the project. She's looking for volunteer instructors to teach or to staff open-access hours.

"We need volunteers who can help walk them through the basics," she said.

An open house introducing the new computer center has been scheduled from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. April 26 with snacks and door prizes.

"Computers are just a small piece of a bigger picture for us," Willis said.

Friendship House takes a holistic approach, she said. Staffers work with individuals to hook them up with social services, parenting programs, job training, mental health services or other agencies.

"You can't just get someone a job if he doesn't have a car," she said. "You can't put someone in a job if he doesn't have the skills to maintain it."