Small Spaces, Big Rewards
-An exploration of the impact of open access to technology at Delridge Neighborhoods Development Association's
Croft Place Townhomes

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Abstract
Croft Place Townhomes, a project of Delridge Neighborhoods Development Association, offers a diverse group of twenty-one families in Southwest Seattle access to affordable and secure housing, human support services, and an opportunity to build community. The Croft Place Community Technology Center (CTC) provides tenants with a small computer lab. On July 16, 2007, the use of this CTC was discussed with staff members and resident youth to explore the impact that access to technology had on community members. It was found that Croft Place tenants use the CTC often and for a variety of purposes, including homework, job applications, accessing community information, communicating with family and friends, and entertainment purposes. Through this use residents have concretely built their technology, leadership and community building skills, and have used information gathered at the CTC to independently meet the basic needs of their families. Barriers to success were fiscally driven, and included a lack of staff members to provide access to users at all times and provide assistance to users who need help understanding the technology.

Background
Founded in 1996, the Delridge Neighborhood's Development Association (DNDA) identifies itself as a private non-profit organization, based in the community of Delridge in West Seattle. The Delridge district of Seattle encompasses neighborhoods in an approximately 10 square mile area of the southwest part of the city. City planning data, taken from the U.S. census in 2000, shows that 33,000 residents, about 25% of whom are children, call the area home. DNDA notes the following common characteristics in the neighborhoods that are included in the Delridge District:

¬Delridge Way is a major means of access to (and through) our community
¬Our ethnic and economic diversity is perhaps unrivaled throughout Seattle
¬We share a unique and varied geography of forested ridges and hillsides
¬We are part of the Longfellow Creek/Puget Creek Watershed

DNDA's main purpose is to create a thriving Delridge community by bringing together neighbors, other non-profits, businesses and local government to build community, preserve affordable housing, enhance the natural environment, and provide opportunities for youth development through cultural arts programs.
One of DNDA's affordable housing efforts is Croft Place Townhomes, an environmentally and community friendly apartment complex that features energy efficient units, a centralized courtyard and play space, and a community technology center (CTC). Croft Place is comprised of 21 households, and all families have incomes under 50% of the Seattle area median. Fifty children live in the complex, the majority of

whom are elementary school age or younger. Fifteen households are headed by single parents, and seven apartments are reserved for families in transition out of homelessness. Families in the transitional units at Croft Place receive case management services for two years, at which time those services are transferred to another family in need. Families may stay as non-transitional tenants as long as they are able to afford to stay, and DNDA does everything they can to make sure housing is accessible to these families, whether it is at Croft Place, or another location. Croft Place is a diverse community that includes immigrants from Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Cambodia. Approximately half of the families at Croft Place are African-American.

DNDA actively encourages community building, for example through the provision of common areas for tenants. One of the common areas is the community technology center (CTC), a computer lab that is open to tenants when a staff member or property manager is onsite to provide access. The CTC was incorporated into the design of the housing complex as a means of providing computer access to members of the Croft Place community. The CTC does not offer classes or specific programs, but rather is an open lab for all residents to use. Due to damage done to the CTC from rough-housing, youth are currently required to be supervised while using the room and equipment.

The lab is a small room, about the size of a home office, housing three computers and a printer/scanner on an L-shaped desk. At the time of our visit, all computers were functioning properly. The computers run the Windows XP operating system, contain an array of software including the Microsoft Office Suite, and come equipped with high speed Internet. There are three office chairs in the lab, two of which are in good condition, while one is missing a back rest. Inside the lab, there is a small bookshelf with binders providing information on community and social services. There is a large window with blinds drawn, and the room is clean and well lit. A case manager's office is connected to the CTC space.

A variety of community partnerships assist technology efforts and offerings at Croft Place. The organization works closely with NPower, a technology training and consulting agency for non-profits. DNDA also works with One Economy to provide computers to residents their housing developments. While the technology center at Croft Place can be categorized as small, conversations with staff and teenagers imply that the benefits to residents are large.

Data Collection

A visit to Croft Place Townhomes was made the morning of July 16, 2007 with a view to finding out more about the impact of the CTC on residents and the community. Two staff interviews were conducted at Croft Place with community builder "S2", who has worked for the organization for four years, and the youth after-school program manager, "S1," who is new to DNDA. A focus group was conducted with two teenagers, "Tom" (14) and "Natalie" (16), who have lived in the complex since its opening two years prior and have used the CTC ever since. The researchers were allowed to observe the technology center, although at the time of our visit it was not being used.

Staff Interviews

According to the Croft Place staff members interviewed, residents use the computer lab on a drop-in basis for a variety of reasons including homework, career

development activities, accessing community information and resources, and entertainment purposes. Staff members use the CTC to offer informal support to residents who are learning about the computers and software applications, as well as for their own professional purposes.

Staff members characterized the provision of a CTC in the Croft complex as an outright success. Community builder S2 expressed that many families do not have computers in their homes and the center provided access that otherwise would be difficult to come by. Youth program manager S1 added that, "Kids really like using the center and computers…they always ask for computer time," going on to say, "For many users, it's the only computer time that they get." The proximity of the center to users was highlighted as one reason for CTC success, as S2 stated, "It's right here." Both staff members noted that the next closest place to use computers free of charge was the library, which is located more than a mile and a half away, and difficult to access without transportation, or with children in tow.

Individual users of the CTC have experienced success in a number of ways. Children and teenagers were able to expand on their creative interests in addition to using the facility for homework, research projects, skill development, and communication with peers, for example through social networking sites such as Facebook. Adults have used the CTC to e-mail with friends, family, and community members for both personal reasons and professional development. Through the CTC, multiple families have learned how to independently access government resources that have proven beneficial to their families. Common uses of the CTC by adults included looking up bus schedules, writing resumes, and applying for jobs. However, the CTC is used most often by adults to look for housing resources, and has been of great help to people in securing affordable housing.

S2 relayed that a year ago, the Section 8 housing waiting list opened for applications for a short period of time. This program, which provides sliding-scale housing vouchers for families based on income and circumstance, historically has packed wait list, and families often miss the opportunity to simply get on the list. Five families from Croft Place were able to apply online at the CTC and four of those five were consequently chosen in the voucher lottery. The provision of even more affordable housing allowed these families greater security in meeting their needs. The CTC provided families with a quick and easy way to successfully apply for housing vouchers.

Furthermore, the CTC provides concrete benefits to the community. Children at Croft Place have used the computers to create a resident newsletter and community music CDs. Adults have used the computers to advertise upcoming community events. S2 relayed, "The CTC has helped a lot of people who thought they didn't know how to do anything. For example, one woman wanted to have a bake sale to raise money for community events. Using the CTC, she was able to learn to use Publisher and market the sale to other residents." Another resident, who works in the banking industry, gave a presentation to other community members on how to set up savings accounts and do online bill-paying at the CTC. Sharing skills with other users is also common practice at Croft Place. All tenants are asked to provide eight hours a month of volunteer service to enhance the community. The CTC has allowed residents to be creative in their volunteer endeavors.

The CTC has also promoted environmental stewardship amongst youth living at Croft Place. One after-school project was centered around a nature scavenger hunt in the wetlands near the local elementary school. Staff and students used digital cameras to take photos of the local environment, which they uploaded and printed back at the CTC. S2 reported that the youth "really got into it," simultaneously learning about nature, technology, and the community they live in.

In addition to expected gains from access to technology and skill development, staff relayed that the tech center has brought people together as a whole to provide solutions to community challenges. For example, as explained earlier in this report, some damage to equipment occurred in the early days of the lab due to kids being rough and careless. Additionally, parents were concerned about what their kids were accessing while online. Residents wanted their children to use the computers, but were worried about the sites they might be visiting. Parents got together with the help of staff and volunteers and put together a list of center rules, for example no teenagers are allowed to be in center without an adult, as well as a list of Web sites that should be filtered. The CTC acted as a catalyst for effective community involvement.

User Interviews

We also spoke with two teenagers, "Natalie" and "Tom", in a focus group environment. They were introduced to the CTC by the program director and have been using it regularly ever since. While both have a computer and dial-up Internet access at home, they prefer to use the lab because it has a faster Internet connection along with software applications that they do not have at home, for example Powerpoint.

Natalie shared that she uses the lab approximately every other day for up to two hours each time. Tom uses the lab mostly during the school year for about 30 minutes each day. They both stated that they use the lab predominately for schoolwork, though we were later told by a staff member that youth are generally observed using the lab for non-schoolwork activities, such as burning CDs and using social networking sites. Interviewees also expressed that youth use the lab for printing schoolwork and are occasionally sent to the lab by their adult family members to research or print out information.

When they started using the CTC, the teens interviewed already had computer skills from school classes, but they informed us that they have built upon those skills at the CTC. For example, Tom has improved his knowledge of Powerpoint at the center, and both teenagers agreed that they benefited by getting their homework done faster at the CTC than they are able to elsewhere.

Both users also felt that their leadership abilities had improved through CTC participation. For example, both talked about passing on their technology knowledge to younger children in the lab to help them learn tasks such as typing and searching the Internet.

Challenges

While the opportunities provided by the CTC at Croft Place are abundant, some challenges also exist. For example, the number of computers is limited, and the CTC can only be accessed through staff members who have multiple duties both on and off site. Focus group youth affirmed this, saying that their primary barrier to using the lab was

access. When the key holder is not on site, users must find the property manager to open the lab for them. They say they often cannot find him, which means they cannot always get into the lab when they need to. The two suggested that besides more access to the lab, having a person at the center to get computer help from would be beneficial to CTC users. S2 noted that residents are sometimes unfamiliar with the tools and resources that are available to them, and this may result in a lack of use or sometimes misuse. S1 relayed, "Kids are learning and they need a lot of supervision and guidance." Croft Place staff agreed that financial resources for staffing the CTC or developing a formal volunteer program to staff the CTC at regular times, offering supervision, technology training and classes, and technical assistance, would help eliminate these barriers and create higher levels of access.

Staff at Croft Place would also like to be able to develop programs to encourage more peer-to-peer information sharing as well as programs that benefit families holistically. Staff relayed that DNDA recently applied for a grant called "Families Connect" in order to offer a digital photography class to all families at all properties. This class intended to teach digital photography skills to families, offer a place for them to get to know one another and tell their stories, and then provide them with a digital camera of their own. Unfortunately, the foundation denied the grant because it would not provide expedient evidence of asset building, for example the acquisition of jobs. S1 sighed, "They didn't see the benefit of incentive and the value of community." Croft Place staff plan to keep the project in hand and look for other funders.

Conclusion
The visit to the Croft Place community technology center allowed insights to the many potential uses, successes, and challenges of CTCs. In the economically and ethnically diverse neighborhood of Delridge, supporting digital inclusion is a necessary element of building a strong community. At Croft Place, a program that provides housing and promotes community through participation, the CTC is a valuable resource to residents who do not have computers and printers or cannot afford Internet service. It helps residents look for employment and housing and do schoolwork more efficiently and effectively. Residents have the opportunity to learn computer skills that build confidence and translate to valuable job skills. The CTC also brings people together to share information and solve problems. Adults have come together to create solutions, services, and products that lead to a stronger community. Teenagers help younger children use the computers, showing that the CTC can be a place for developing leadership skills as well as learning. Children utilize digital media as a means of expanding learning in other areas. However, staff and residents at Croft Place recognized that the CTC would benefit from additional staff, as a lack of available staff to unlock the door as necessary, supervise youth, and provide computer assistance and instruction has been a barrier to use. Staff members are committed to removing these barriers by recruiting volunteers to supervise the CTC, and accessing various funding sources to increase offerings that are beneficial and relevant to residents of Croft Place.

Appendix: Photos and Diagrams

Photo credit: Melanie Mercer http://www.flickr.com/photos/mmercer/459324690/in/set-72157600077723514/

Photo credit: Melanie Mercer
http://www.flickr.com/photos/mmercer/459334122/in/set-72157600077723514/

Photo credit: DNDA- One Community Campaign
http://www.onecommunitycampaign.org/newsletter/dnda_newsletterJuly.htm

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http://www.onecommunitycampaign.org/newsletter/dnda_newsletterJuly.htm

Location
Photo credit: Yahoo maps
CTC Diagram, as recalled collectively by research team - 10 feet