

La Casa Hogar—bringing families into the community

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Abstract

La Casa Hogar houses a community technology center (CTC) for adult female immigrants in the Yakima Valley. Many users are Spanish speaking with limited education and computer skills. The center provides classes and open lab access to computers with high speed Internet. To obtain data on individual, family and community outcomes, six employees and four users were interviewed on July 23-24, 2007. Findings revealed that the CTC is significant to users as an educational site, as well as a place of safety. Outcomes included increased confidence to use computers, better job prospects, increased community participation, greater ability to support children's education, and improved personal educational attainment and English skills.

Introduction

La Casa Hogar, a branch of the Yakima Interfaith Coalition, is a nonprofit agency located in Yakima, Washington. Founded in 1995 by Ninfa Gutierrez, its mission is to better serve immigrant women and children in the Yakima Valley by providing them with emergency aid services as well as educational and self-development opportunities. At present, La Casa Hogar shares space with another Yakima Interfaith Coalition program in a repurposed house located in a quiet Yakima city neighborhood. However, this program is scheduled to vacate the premises in the near future, leaving La Casa Hogar as the building's sole occupant.

An important aspect of the center's education and learning opportunities is its community technology center (CTC). The technology center is comprised of a classroom and small computer lab, located on the second floor of the house. English, Spanish, general education and technology classes take place in the classroom area, with lessons often making use of the computer lab next door. The lab is housed in a long, narrow room painted a soothing light blue. It is lined with desks holding the center's nine Dell computers. Each desk is supplied with a rolling chair, and posted above the workstations are hand-lettered sheets with keyboard commands for producing Spanish characters such as accented vowels. The computers run the Windows XP operating system, and come equipped with the full suite of Office programs. The language application Rosetta Stone is installed for learning English, as is a typing program and a folder of miscellaneous applications and resources devoted to drivers education. All computers have high speed Internet connectivity.

Data Collection

To better understand the benefits of La Casa Hogar's CTC, ten women were recruited and interviewed over several visits to the center on July 23-24, 2007: five La Casa employees, one volunteer, and four CTC users. All staff were Latina, ranging in age from approximately 19 to 55 years. Length of employment at La Casa varied from less than one year to just over six years, while job responsibilities consisted of administrative and technology support, grant

writing, cooking, housekeeping, teaching, and childcare. Users ranged in age from 38 to 57 years, and all gave Spanish as their first language. Ethnically, three women identified as Mexican and one as Hispanic. No user had completed a high school education; two had attended school for six years, one for eight years, and one until she was sixteen. None of the users were working at the time of the interviews, although three were either seeking employment or had secured future employment. Two participants were fruit pickers who were expecting to work when called, one was seeking employment as a caregiver, and one gave her occupation as a housewife. Finally, user household structures varied, with household sizes ranging from two to five members.

La Casa Hogar Women and CTC Use

To obtain a more complete picture of La Casa Hogar's community technology center, it was important to first ascertain how the women had learned about the center, how long they had been using the center, and how often they visited the center. Participants indicated that word of mouth brought most of the users to the center, however, friends, family and service agencies also acted as referring mechanisms. The women indicated that they had been using the center for as short as a few months to seven years. When asked about the amount of time spent at the CTC, the women found it difficult to formulate a response given that attendance was irregular and depended heavily on family and work obligations. When they could attend, they usually came to classes that met for at least two hours a day three times a week, totaling an approximate usage of six hours per week. Carolina¹, a 38-year old fruit picker and mother of three, estimated that when she attended classes she spent six to eight hours a week at the center. Staff confirmed that June to October was a less active period at the center as most users were employed in seasonal fruit picking during that time.

Outcomes of CTC Use

The purpose of this case study was to investigate the benefits accrued as a result of CTC use. Both staff and users were asked how the women were helped or what they had gained from availing of La Casa Hogar's community technology center. Center impact was evident according to individual, family and community outcomes.

Individual Outcomes

With regard to individual benefits, improved English skills were cited in several cases. Although none of the users were yet comfortable conversing in English, it was mentioned that even learning basic words was helpful. Carolina articulated the importance of learning English when she declared:

I wanted to better myself...I wanted to educate myself. Learning English was important. And it's important to learn English to communicate with other people, and to find a better job...I've developed my English. Little by little, I can ask things and talk in English. I'm learning a little, and I talk more. Also I can find information better now. In the library, I can find it better. It just helps not to be scared.

¹ All participants have been given aliases for privacy protection.

Echoing this sentiment, 57-year old Esperanza said that she came to the CTC to learn English because she has twelve children, two of whom have graduated from high school and “talk in English, and I don’t understand.”

The classes offered at the CTC have also helped many women complete their General Educational Development (GED) test. One of the most compelling examples of individual impact came from MaryAnne, the center’s cook and housekeeper of the past three years. Although a La Casa employee, MaryAnne is also a student. Here is her story:

I lived 27 years in the US. Over 20 years in Los Angeles. I came here; my daughter was sick. She asked for help. When I came here, I couldn’t speak or understand English. [At La Casa Hogar] I start at English level 1. Now I am at level 5. When I finish level 5, I’d like to go to college. I like to be a nurse. Soon I take my GED. I have 4 kids. I worked for my kids. Now is time for me.

A number of women also used the CTC as a stepping-stone to college. By improving their English skills and completing the GED, they were better prepared to pursue college degrees.

Esperanza highlighted another individual benefit of CTC use, learning basic computer skills. She spoke enthusiastically about discovering how to use a computer, and was particularly proud of knowing how to type without needing to look at the keyboard. Many of the women spoke of how they came to the CTC with a fear of the computer, but center technology classes provided them with the confidence to learn basic skills first, and then progress onto more advanced topics.

For Laura, a 42-year old fruit picker, passing her driving test was accredited to the help she received at La Casa’s CTC. By becoming comfortable with a computer and learning how to navigate a computer-based simulation program, Laura was prepared to take and pass the computerized Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) test. Many women at La Casa Hogar had found the computerized driver’s test impossible to pass prior to attending the CTC. The driver’s education instructor Angelina pointed out that, “They understand driving situations by using the computer better than reading a book. It is easier to see and use it when they can’t read or write English.” Laura, and many more women, were able to obtain their licenses with the help of La Casa Hogar’s CTC.

In addition to ESL, GED, and driver’s training applications, the CTC installs the CONEVYT program on its computers. This program provides a type of distance education in which immigrant women can complete various levels of education through the Mexican educational system. The portal is linked to a variety of Mexican agencies such as the National Institute of Adult Education and the Department of Education. Stephany, a computer class assistant who has lived in the United States for one and a half years, explained it this way, “It is a program that gives the opportunity to learn over the Internet. Some women finish elementary or middle school in Mexico. Some people don’t finish [school] in Mexico, but they can through this program.” Educational attainment in any language is a positive outcome for the women of La Casa Hogar.

Significantly, the women have benefited from using the La Casa CTC through the development of the confidence necessary to pass their drivers tests, learn to speak English, or obtain their GEDs. The center functions as an emotionally supportive and safe environment for them to learn and connect with others.

Family Outcomes

Positive outcomes associated with the family were also apparent at La Casa Hogar's CTC. Ana, a 42-year old newly single mother said, "From all of this, I bettered my family. All of these classes are so important in improving family life." For some families, the CTC acts as their only access to computers and the Internet. The center becomes a vehicle for providing educational support to their children, keeping their families safe, and maintaining connections with family and friends.

The organization's administrator spoke of how school-aged children benefitted from the center as their mothers were able to help them with homework and computer tasks. She elaborated,

We had a woman with preschool children, and she saw a kid's sheet on the Internet and asked if she could print it out to work at home with her kids. So she did, every day, and it was good for her kids.

According to Carolina, the CTC "helps us as a family. It helps my kids that I am losing my fear of my computer. It's a lot better since I can help my kids now." Thanks to her improved English and computer skills, Carolina can provide better educational support for her 17-year old son and two young daughters. Similarly, the center users indicated that their children were more open to learning because they have an example in their mothers. Carolina, referring to her children, explained, "They feel proud that their mother goes to school."

The CTC at La Casa also helps keep families safe. Laura, a mother of three including two teenage sons, found classes on gangs extremely helpful. She was familiar with youth getting into trouble in Mexico as well as the United States, but did not know about local gangs and how to tell if someone was involved in them until she took classes at the CTC. In addition, some women with home computers found that their lack of knowledge about computers could pose a threat to their children's safety, realizing that their children could potentially be accessing information about pornography, guns, or satanic worship. By learning about computer security and management, La Casa Hogar women could provide increased protection for their families.

The CTC also provides a way to communicate with family and friends, both in the United States and back home. This not only promotes technological understanding in the U.S., but also in the home country. The administrator told a story of one user who communicates by Web camera with her family in Mexico, stating, "...it brings the family to the cyber cafes in Mexico. They learn the computer, and it benefits both places, both parts learn the computer." Not only has the user improved her access to technology, she has inspired family in Mexico to take steps towards digital participation by corresponding with her via email and video.

Outcomes in the Community and Washington State

The community experienced many benefits as a result of the women's use of the CTC. According to La Casa Hogar's administrator, "breaking fear of computers is good for community. There's computers everywhere... Women become more self-confident, more able to participate and integrate into community." The English classes taught using CTC computers also facilitate women to speak for themselves within the community. Expressing a similar conviction, Marisol, a grant writing volunteer, stated that women "feel empowered and valued in their neighborhoods" as a result of skills and confidence developed at the CTC. She went on to

explain that some of the women users were forming a community coalition in their neighborhood.

Furthermore, economic conditions improve as English skills improve and women become more comfortable talking with others. Stephany pointed out, “When Mexican people know more of the [U.S.] culture, more language, they get jobs.” Better paying jobs may address social concerns such as welfare, taxes and paying for children’s education. Moreover, the state benefits by having a workforce that is not tied to seasonal work, but able to be employed year round with potentially higher paying jobs.

Challenges facing La Casa Hogar’s CTC

Operators of community technology centers wish to provide optimum experiences for their users, and La Casa Hogar is no different, yet challenges and barriers frequently preclude this goal. When asked about such challenges, staff presented a number of issues. Space was the predominant problem for the La Casa CTC. Classrooms were considered too small when large classes convened. Similarly, there were too few computers. The CTC had nine computers but classes often had a compliment of 12-15 people. This resulted in the need to double up on computers, which was looked upon unfavorably by a number of students.

Finding qualified teachers was also a challenge. The center’s administrator spoke of the time La Casa Hogar was able to obtain an experienced Yakima Valley College teacher for a computer class. However, in order to retain the instructor, they were required to have a minimum of 15 students in the class. The administrator explained,

At the time, we had eight computers, and we began with 15 students. Students had to share, and some of them didn’t like that so they dropped. Then the teacher can’t stay because less than 15 students. So then we started with volunteers for teachers. Sometimes, no students. Then students would come, no volunteer.

Additionally, too few hours of operation, lack of childcare, and work commitments were seen as barriers to CTC attendance. The center was only open Monday through Friday, yet many women felt that they would be better able to attend on Saturday and Sunday. Children are welcome at La Casa, but childcare is only provided to those aged 2-5 years, although mothers are allowed to keep infants with them at the center. The childcare service did not address the needs of children in other age groups. Work created the most significant barrier to using the CTC for immigrant women. As Laura, a fruit picker, noted, “It’s difficult when I want to come and work [at the center]. I lose time when I’m not working [in the orchards] and am here, and that means I lose money.”

When asked how the center could be improved or developed in the future, staff felt that providing more space and reliable teachers was the primary way to improve the center. Updated technology was also judged important to the center’s future. Offering more classes and increasing the hours of operation was also deemed necessary for future CTC development, as this would help meet the disparate schedules of La Casa Hogar’s users. Expansion of childcare beyond children age 2-5 years was seen to eliminate a considerable barrier and permit more women to benefit from use of the CTC.

Conclusions – Digital Inclusion

The La Casa Hogar community technology center targets Spanish-speaking immigrant women who typically have low levels of education, limited to non-existent English language skills, and no computer or Internet experience. Women who have often never used a computer before are prepared at La Casa Hogar for the day-to-day interactions with technology required by life in twenty-first century Washington state. Users develop language, computer, and driving skills while also completing requirements necessary to obtain their GEDs. All of these skills empower women to speak for themselves both within their families and within the community, and can lead to material benefits such as increased employment and increased economic status.

As most users do not have either a computer or high speed Internet connectivity in their homes, the La Casa CTC is often the only place that the women can access such technology. Without the center, many would simply lack the confidence and equipment to be able to participate in the digital world. The classes and instruction given at the CTC helps reduce the anxiety and stress associated with technology and helps users to take ownership of technology as a part of normal life, thus increasing their inclusion in the digital realm. It gives users a sense of empowerment to be able to use computers and the Internet for their informational and educational needs.

The families of the women who use the center are also brought further into the digital world. The women can better support their children's educational goals and technology awareness, finding online resources to encourage preschool children to learn at home and developing skills to aid older children with computer use and Internet research. The women become role models for their children, inspiring them to aim high in their educational goals. Computer proficiency allows women to understand how their children are using computers, and how to ensure that they are making safe choices in the Web sites they visit. The CTC at La Casa Hogar is also inspiring women to bring technology into their homes. Many of the women spoke of their hopes to learn enough or save enough to purchase a computer with Internet access in the future. Some women had already managed to achieve this goal, with La Casa Hogar helping out to find computer donors.

In summing up the importance of La Casa Hogar's CTC, the administrator, a former student and now an employee who works with administrative services and technology, said it best when she testified that, "I feel happy when I see women come and see it [the computer] for the first time. Then months later they use email to communicate, they break the fear of turning it on, and know they can't break it [computer]." Even if these are quiet accomplishments, they must not be underestimated.