Bridging the Information and Communication Technology Gap

Elizabeth Herrera

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bridging the Information and Communication Technology Gap correlates to the Santa Clara County Social Service Agency (SSA) mission of providing resources and opportunities in a culturally responsive manner to enhance the quality of life in the county by protecting, educating and empowering individuals and families. SSA disposes an average of approximately 400 computers a year costing the county roughly $7,600. If recycled, this would have a cost savings to the planet of $13,200, while reusing jumps the cost savings to $159,200. Aside from cell phones, computers are a prime source of communication, and with the constant change in technology, the county is constantly upgrading its computers.

Computers are considered a luxury to low-income families, while they are standard for middle- and upper-class families. Low-income families struggle daily to make ends meet, and it is SSA's mission to empower our community to become independent. Following Contra Costa County Employment and Health Services Department's PC Donation Program will allow clients to communicate with their workers to maintain their benefits, and have the ability to reach out to other resources that could possibly improve their quality of life.

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Introduction

Jane, a single mother of three small children, who is not receiving child support and was laid off last month applies for social sevice benefits on a Friday. She completes her intake process and finds out that she cannot be approved benefits because she is missing pertinent verifications. Due to the time of day and lack of transportation, she is unable to submit the documents until the following week and is unable to buy groceries until the verifications have been submitted. Computers can be found in local libraries and community centers; however, some families are unable to find transportation or have children to care for which makes it more challenging for them to leave home. What if other barriers prevent her from going into the office as planned? What if she had a system readily available to her at home, which allowed her to send her verification electronically so that she did not have to go a weekend without groceries for her family? Personal computers (PC's) have been around for over 36 years; it is almost impossible to imagine that some households manage without having a computer at home.

Computers play a vital role in our daily lives, personally and professionally, and provide opportunities including but not limited to: improving communication, job searching, creating documents, taking online courses, doing homework, paying bills, reading the news and books, shopping, paying bills, and allowing immediate access to information. Computers are affordable to middle- and upper-class families while low-income families do without. Fifty percent of low-income families who have a combined household income for adults less than $30,000 do not own a desktop or laptop computer, while approximately 97% of adult with households income over $100,000 have computers (Geiger, 2017). Providing computers to more people who need them is the first step towards bridging the information and communication technology gap.

The Santa Clara County (SCC) Social Service Agency (SSA) Department of Employment and Benefits Services (DEBS) currently provides computer support to adult-aged clients; however, the support is limited, depending on the benefits for which they qualify and receive. Adult clients who qualify for employment or vocational services are provided computer labs for employment readiness and employment search classes. Limited access can create a few challenges for clients, such as not being able to attend sessions due to a range of barriers, including transportation or lack of childcare. What if their children need computers to complete homework for school and are also unable to find transportation to community centers or libraries? What about adults who do not qualify for county employment benefits? The department serves an array of clients, and although the county provides a variety of resources to them, there are still major barriers that prevent them from receiving government assistance.

The previous scenario, where Jane was unable to obtain benefits before the weekend, could have been avoided if she had a computer at home. If a computer was readily accessible, she could have downloaded the needed verifications from an online account or taken a picture of the verifications and emailed them to her worker directly before the end of the day. Additionally, if she had a computer and if there was going to be a delay in receiving her benefits, she could have researched other resources available to her, such

as the food bank, confirmed its hours of operation, understood what was needed before going in, and found other possible locations she may not have been aware of. Currently low-income families are unable to afford computers since they have other priorities to focus on for their families, such as food, shelter, and clothes. What if there was something that the SSA could do to help their clients?

SSA disposes of 300 to 500 computers a year, not only because a computer's life expectancy is three to five years, but also because technology is constantly changing and improving, and those computers are unable to support newer operating systems. For SSA, if the computers cannot be used by other departments, they automatically get recycled through a contractor. Although the disposal process is environmentally friendly, what if they could modify the disposal process to help the community at no additional cost? Part of SSA's responsibility is to help alleviate or eliminate barriers for clients, and to provide additional resources to them so that they can become independent. With a computer, Jane could job search from home, prepare a resume, research employers, and send documents to Social Services so that she can receive CalFresh benefits and be able to purchase food for her children.

Contra Costa County PC Donation Program

The Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) of Contra Costa County (CCC) currently has a PC Donation Program that offers free refurbished computers, free technical support, free basic computer skill classes, and also assists qualified Human Services clients in receiving free to low-cost internet services. EHSD is able to provide these resources to their clients with the help of a nonprofit organization called Tech Exchange based in Oakland. Tech Exchange is dedicated to providing digital equity to residents across the East Bay by providing free refurbished computers and digital literacy training to low-income families and supporting schools' and community centers' technology needs. By refurbishing technology donated by individuals, businesses, and organizations, they have

diverted 700 tons of e-waste from landfills (https://www.techexchange.org/our-story.html). Although the organization's primary focus is the East Bay, they are looking to expand their services throughout the Bay Area.

EHSD replaces their PC's every five to six years, which provides Tech Exchange with approximately 400 PC's a year. Once EHSD destroys the hard drives to ensure they are unusable, they deliver the computers to the non-profit organization quarterly or biannually depending on their inventory. Once Tech Exchange receives the computers, they refurbish them, install Microsoft office software, and distribute them to the community at one of their pick-up events. The process for receiving a free computer consists of submitting the "Technology Works" application online, in person, or via email. Once the application is received, clerical support staff review the case to ensure the client receives EHSD benefits and that their case is in good standing. When clerical staff determine a client is eligible, they contact the Eligibility Worker to confirm the address and inform them of the referral status; there is no action required by the Eligibility Worker. All documents are then scanned into the county's image document system. Once clerical staff have compiled approximately 25-30 qualified clients, which is typically every 30 to 45 days, they send the information to Tech Exchange. At the same time, EHSD's clerical support staff send a letter to the client regarding their eligibility and instructions regarding their pick up. Once Tech Exchange receives the listing, they call or text the eligible clients to inform them that they were selected, and provide the details on how and when to obtain their computers. Before an EHSD client can pick-up a computer they must complete a free basic computer skills class offered by Tech Exchange. If EHSD is interested in reviewing the status of their referrals, Tech Exchange makes it easy by sharing their live tracking system that allows them to view the PC status of all referrals made.

EHSD promotes their PC Donation program to their clients by displaying a detailed PowerPoint presentation on their lobby TV's, posting flyers,

and including links on EHSD and Tech Exchange websites directing them to the applications. In early 2018, EHSD sent a mailer targeting areas that were identified as submitting the fewest applications, in hopes of reaching clients who may be more disconnected to technology than others. All promotional materials, including the website, are translated into their county's threshold languages.

Not only do low-income families in the community benefit from the PC Donation program collaboration between EHSD and Tech Exchange, but Tech Exchange also provides opportunities to other individuals within the community to provide workforce development.

Recommendations

The reason for Contra Costa County's PC Donation is to provide opportunities for needy clients to receive PC's for their use, and to help Contra Costa County bridge the digital divide. EHSD's experience with developing their PC Donation Program has shown that it has been beneficial for their clients with minimal resources and funds. EHSD and Tech Exchange's business process has been reviewed and meets all the requirements of California's AB-1998 County Surplus Property Assembly Bill No. 1998. This bill authorizes the county to donate surplus computer equipment to clients in good standing, receiving public benefits under Cal-Fresh, CalWORKS, Medi-Cal, or General Assistance by utilizing a lottery selection. The partnership between EHSD and Tech Exchange has been going on for 2 years, and since then they have provided 257 EHSD clients with free PC computers, provided them with basic computers skills, and assisted with low-income internet services (*Figure 1*).

The staffing needs of this program are minimal. At EHSD it takes about three hours per month for support. This work is divided between a clerical support staff member in their WPR unit, and one IS Manager. The cost for accepting SSA's used computers and offering the free services to clients will range from $200-500 depending on the program,

FIGURE 1
EHSD Referrals 4/2016 – 3/2018

Referrals Sent	Count	%
Duplicate Name | Received	32	2.36%
Received Computer and Services	257	18.92%
Registered | No Show	89	6.55%
Emailed or text, no response	980	72.16%
Grand Total	1358	100%

fees, staffing and logistics being requested by Tech Exchange. Although this program is funded through the Thomas J. Long Foundation, Tech Exchange would consider having a percentage of donated computers go directly to the organization to be given to clients of their choice, while the remaining computers would be donated to SSA clients. There are foundations in the South Bay similar to Thomas J. Long Foundation, such as the Silicon Valley Foundation, Bay Area Philanthropy, and River of Life Foundation, that may be interested in sponsoring this program. Tech Exchange is considering extending their services to the South Bay and is currently working with Alum Rock School District to develop a parent engagement and teacher component. If they did extend their services to the South Bay and are able to maintain a site nearby, there may be decrease in fees due to logistics.

Alternatively, if SSA prefers to work with an organization closer to home, De Anza–Foothill College and Occupational Training Institute (OTI) has a computer donation program for their community. Although it does not provide all the resources, such as free basic computer skills, free technical support, free exchanges, free Microsoft office software, or assistance with low internet costs, it does accept computers and laptops, provides workforce development for their students, offers Libre office software program, and refurbishes computers to give to low-income students for free. Students who are in this

FIGURE 2
Tech Exchange vs. OTI

Tech Exchange							
Equipment Accepted	Staff Needed	Cost per Computer	Services Include:	Pick-up included	SSA Clients Benefit	Non-SSA Clients Benefit	South Bay Location
Personal Computers	0	$200–500	Free refurbished computers, Microsoft office software installed, basic computer class, free technical support and assistance with low internet services	No	Yes	Yes	No

OTI							
Equipment Accepted	Staff Needed	Cost per Computer	Services Include:	Pick-up included	SSA Clients Benefit	Non-SSA Clients Benefit	South Bay Location
Personal Computers and Laptops	0	$0–10	Free refurbished computers and Libre office software installed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

program are not only taught how to work on computers, they are taught practical employment skills, and referred to companies that partner with OTI to help their students find employment. When SSA donates their computers, hard drives are destroyed to prevent reuse for security measures, meaning any organization accepting computer donations would have to replace the hard drives. Hard drives cost approximately $8 to $10 each, and SSA pays approximately $11 per computer to recycle, which would give SSA a savings of $2 $3 per computer if they were to donate their computers to OTI. Although the savings are slight, overall the county would be contributing to a good cause, not going upside-down financially, and saving the environment. OTI expressed interest in possibly expanding their clientele to SSA, yet further discussion will be needed.

Figure 2 provides a side-by-side comparison of Tech Exchange and OTI; SCC will need to determine which factors are more beneficial for not only their clients, but their agency. Aside from the financial differences between the two PC Donation programs, another determinant to consider is the business process. Tech Exchange has been working with Contra Costa County for two years and has a business process in place that Santa Clara County could mimic, while OTI does not have a business process, and one would have to be developed which would cause a delay in implementation. The Tech Exchange business process includes marketing material, applications, letters to clients, and has been proven a success between Tech Exchange and EHSD.

Conclusion

With either option, SSA would help Santa Clara County's citizens bridge the digital divide. Low-income families could use computers to improve their way of life in various ways such as by searching for jobs, taking online courses, submitting

verifications to their Eligibility Workers, avoiding transportation barriers, making contact electronically, and allowing immediate access to all information. In addition to low-income families benefiting from the donation program, students and seniors employed by the partner would also benefit by being given hands-on learning and an opportunity to re-enter the workforce. The county benefits from this program not only by helping our community, but also by being able to communicate with clients and share resources. SSA would also help the environment. Recycling a desktop has a cost savings to the planet of $33 and by re-using, the cost savings jumps to $398 (EPA Calculator). Aside from cell phones, computers are the prime source of communication, and with the constant change in technology, SSA is constantly upgrading computers to keep up. If not approved, low-income families will continue to struggle with pursuing employment, education, helping children with schoolwork, communicating with their SSA worker, and accessing additional resources. DEBS is continuously looking for innovative ideas to better streamline business processes and utilize resources to help the community. Donating SSA's used computers will not only help the community, it will help the environment.

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