austinfree.net

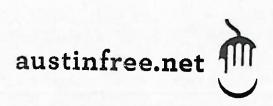**Austin Free-Net
Report to the Austin Community Technology and
Telecommunications Commission**

Why We Exist

Austin Free-Net exists to provide equal access to technology education and computing resources for local adults. We are a nonprofit organization established in 1995 to address digital inequality. Computer literacy and Internet access are critical to workforce vitality and individual success in our increasingly computer-dependent world.

According to a recent study by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, household income is the greatest predictor of Internet use for Americans (Jansen). In 2011, "Almost half (46 percent) of the households in the lowest-income category did not have a computer, compared to only four percent of the highest-income households," says the U.S. Department of Commerce. Less than 33 percent of Americans with the lowest incomes have adopted broadband at home.

Household income is the greatest predictor of Internet use for Americans; however, ethnicity, gender, age, disability and literacy attainment also contribute to the digital divide. (Jansen)

Our clients are predominantly low-income (82 percent below $15,000/year), minority (59 percent), and/or low literacy with less than a high-school level education. Most are unemployed (64 percent).

Digital inequality impacts our economy directly by creating barriers to employment. More than 80 percent of Fortune 500 companies require online job applications, including major employers such as Wal-Mart, Target, and Costco (Genachowski, 2011). U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke said recently, "In a globalized, 21st century economy, when you don't have regular access to the high-speed Internet – and the skills to use it – your education, business, and employment opportunities are narrowed."

How We Help

We provide free public computer centers and computer literacy classes for adults at 21 sites in Austin. By partnering with established community organizations

and anchor institutions we are able to serve our clients at locations they already know and trust.

Staff Trainers at Austin Free-Net specialize in adult education, and are skilled at teaching those who have struggled to succeed in a traditional classroom environment. We offer computer literacy training in both English and Spanish, at no cost.

The Austin Free-Net service model allows for each of our centers to provide computer access and training to Austin's most vulnerable in a way that best serves the client's needs.

In our history, we have launched more than 75 public computer spaces, including the City of Austin's libraries.

Our Impact
In 2012 we are projected to serve 150,000 adults. Of those to be trained, we conservatively estimate that 2.5 percent will be new users who are under/unemployed. With the state living wage at $7.64 per hour, our economic impact is more than $66.8 million annually. Using the Texas median income of $38,609 per year, our impact grows to more than $126.1 million per year.

Our Services
We offer four types of free services for our clients: public computer labs, drop-in computer literacy clinics, computer classes (in English and Spanish), and public access to the Internet (WiFi). In addition, we are piloting low-cost education certification (Strata IT Fundamentals, A+ and Network+) and technical support to nonprofits as a strategy to create sustainability for Austin Free-Net.

The Importance of Training
The 21 public computer centers that Austin Free-Net operates provide not only access to technology, but the training to use it. Both components are vital to our success. The centers and staff are seen as beacons of success within the community. They serve as tools to speak to both imminent client needs and a hope for a better future.

Austin Free-Net has created a curriculum that addresses basic technology areas that scaffold the learner into more advanced technology platforms. Clients often arrive at the centers with personal needs and concerns such as how to access health services or basic assistance, how to gain employment and their own employability. Austin Free-Net provides training that concentrates on those needs through the use of technology. We help create independent computer users who are empowered to access information that will enhance their lives.

The difference between Austin Free-Net training services and that of other groups is that our training is free, held daily on a drop-in basis and addresses the specific needs of adult learners. Austin Free-Net provides training for more than 460 participants per month using proprietary curriculum especially developed for adult learners. Our curriculum employs the use of analogies, illustrations and activities that teach computer and Internet concepts rather than linear tasks; thus, it arms the new computer user with the adaptive skills needed to access a wide variety of websites, online forms, software and applications. This curriculum is not offered through any other provider in Austin or world-wide.

Austin Free-Net continues to strive for visibility within the community. We serve as the only entity of its kind in Austin. We reach. We serve. And we embrace the most vulnerable within our community. Austin Free-Net gives our clients a voice - a way to move from marginalization to empowerment with the click of a mouse.

Statistics
- 157 computers at 21 sites
- 460 students served per month (average)
- 1,700 training hours offered monthly (average)
- 10,000 user sessions provided per month (average)
- 150 volunteers hours per month provided (average)

Locations
- ARCH (Austin Resource Center for the Homeless)-78701
- Blackland Neighborhood Center-78722
- Casa Marianella-78702
- Cedar Creek United Methodist Church-78612
- Communities For Recovery-78751
- Conley-Guerrero Senior Activity Center-78702
- DeWitty Center (4 labs) -78702
- East Austin Neighborhood Center-78702
- Lyons Gardens-78702
- M Station-78704
- Oak Springs Villas-78702
- Project Recovery-78701
- Rosewood Zaragosa Neighborhood Center-78702
- South Austin Neighborhood Center-78704
- Spring Terrace-78752
- St. John s Neighborhood Center-78752
- Trinity Center-78701
- Ventana del Soul-78741

BTOP Funding

On September 13, 2010, U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke announced 35 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act investments to help bridge the technological divide, boost economic growth, create jobs, and improve education and healthcare across the country. The awardees included $9.6 million Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grant to the Texas Connects Coalition (TXC2). Austin Free-Net is a key partner in the coalition.

This investment in Austin Free-Net has allowed significant growth and program enhancements, including the following:

- 40% increase in number of public computer centers (15 to 21)
- 76% increase in the number of computers deployed in the field (89 to 157)
- 41% increase in monthly user sessions (7,300 to 10,000)
- 3,947% increase in monthly training hours offered (18 to 1,700)
- 878% increase in number of training participants per month (47 to 460)
- 263% increase in the number of volunteers participating each month (11 to 40)

Beyond BTOP
Austin Free-Net receives an average of $67,000 per month in BTOP funding for our programs. While we continually work towards sustainability, without BTOP or other funding to sustain our current offerings we reduce all programs in mid 2013. This will result in site closures, reduction or elimination of training hours, reduced public computer center availability and staff layoffs. With the support of individual donors, grant funding and small revenue streams we aim to minimize that impact.

Our hope is that local, state and federal government will continue to move towards universal broadband access and all that access implies. Ongoing investment in organizations that confront the digital divide and barriers such as computer literacy will be required. As technology advances and economic disparity exists, there will be a need for publically supported efforts to ensure digital equity.

What would happen if AUSTIN FREE-NET no longer existed?
Our 21 centers are located in neighborhoods that are economically marginalized and segregated by a lack of digital inclusion. According to the 2010 census, the average percentage of people living at or below the poverty line in those neighborhoods we serve is 10 percent higher than the national average. Without Austin Free-Net, our neighbors would have no free computer training to raise their standard of living.

We touch those community members who are most in need. Without our presence, our availability, our free access, the community would have a stagnant economy and workforce.

Without Austin Free-Net the technology barrier would remain impenetrable and the following would be impossible:

- 10,300 computer users a month

- 1,700 hours of free computer training available to the community

- 460 monthly participants in training classes, including job search and resume building

Our clients attest that our direct support leads to employment, promotion, increased communication with teachers and school officials- - keeping our parents involved in the educational future of their children. However, most prominent for us is when a client discloses that their life is better and more manageable because of their understanding and use of technology.

We are the only entity providing dedicated access and technology training for life enhancement to individuals and families at no cost. The City of Austin currently supports Austin Free-Net with three percent of our annual budget or $4,484.53 per month equaling $53,815.56 per year. BTOP provides the remaining 97 percent.

In mid-2013, the BTOP grant will end, leaving a gap in service. With your support, Austin Free-Net will continue champion our community. We are requesting a 200 percent increase in support or $13,453.59 per month for a total of $161,443 per year, for five years. This five-year plan will allow us to ramp up our sustainability efforts. After the fifth year we will be positioned to allow for a reduction in City support without negatively impacting our programs or clients.

Our sustainability plan includes: fee for services and specific technology certification prep classes, grants, corporate sponsorships and individual donors. Implementation will begin in August 2012.

Planning now will safeguard the digital integrity of our city. Your continued partnership and support will ensure that the City of Austin remains a leader in technology and community.

Thank you for your consideration.

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