

Chapter 4

CASE STUDY: AUSTIN, TEXAS

THE AUSTIN CONTEXT

Austin, Texas, is one of the nation's leading high-tech cities and was recently dubbed the second most wired city in the country, behind San Francisco. Those working in the community technology field in Austin debate the extent to which the high-tech atmosphere has fostered the creation and growth of organizations focused on providing widespread access to IT. However, both inside and outside the city, Austin is recognized as a leader in this area because of its cutting-edge and multiple approaches to the access issue.

The majority of Austin's community technology activists believe that Austin's position as a leader in this area has more to do with progressive government and the activism of its citizenry than with the fact that Austin is a high-tech city. The city government adopted an entrepreneurial approach to IT very early on. According to Lodis Rhodes, a professor at the University of Texas, "in dealing with issues of poverty and racism and a whole lot of other things, if you can't figure out a way to make it work in Austin, it won't work. People think it's bad, but relatively speaking it's not even close" (Rhodes 1999).

At the same time, concern about providing universal access is not simply altruistic. One reason the city and the state have prioritized access is that information industries form Texas's leading economic sector. Government has a vested interest in maintaining an environment that is conducive to the growth of this sector. Therefore, Austin needs a highly trained workforce that is capable of supporting its information industries. In fact, much of the support for widespread access to IT has been in the form of workforce development. When Austin competed three years ago with Portland, Oregon, to lure Samsung, a key issue was whether or not Austin had an adequately skilled workforce to staff the company—Austin won. Although this was considered a victory for Austin, existing high-tech companies expressed concern. David Doolittle, vice president of Motorola, said, "It was one more semiconductor company in town competing for the exact same people that everybody else is competing for" (Doolittle 1998).

HISTORY OF PUBLIC SUPPORT

State Initiatives

The Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund (TIF) is the most significant of Texas's information technology initiatives. The TIF was established as part of House Bill 2128, the 1995 legislation that reformed telecommunications regulation in Texas. The main objective of the legislation was to reduce the regulatory burden on local telephone companies—mainly Southwestern Bell, which serves over 75 percent of the state—and establish ground rules for the entry of new competitors into local telephone markets. At

the same time, the legislation emphasized “protecting and maintaining the wide availability of high-quality, interoperable, standards-based telecommunications services at affordable rates.” To further that objective, telecommunications carriers in the state were required to pay into the TIF at the rate of \$150 million per year for each of the ten years following the bill’s enactment. The TIF, whose administrative apparatus was established in late 1995, awards grants and loans, with priority given to projects and proposals that

- represent collaborative efforts of multiple schools, universities, or libraries;
- contribute matching funds from other sources;
- show promise of becoming self-sustaining;
- help users of information learn new ways to acquire and use information through telecommunications;
- extend specific educational information and knowledge services to groups not previously served, especially those in rural and remote areas;
- result in more efficient or effective learning than the learning gained through conventional teaching;
- improve the effectiveness and efficiency of health-care delivery; or
- take advantage of distance-learning opportunities in rural and urban school districts with disproportionate numbers of at-risk youths or high dropout rates.

Much like initiatives at the federal level, the focus of the TIF is to connect schools, libraries, hospitals, and other institutions. Some community technology activists in Austin expressed their dismay that the TIF does not fund community technology efforts, such as AFN and Austin Learning Academy (ALA). TIF officials are currently developing a request for proposals (RFP) that would allow such organizations to compete for funds; however, those who have been working on these issues for a long time noted that the TIF should have consulted them regarding the structure of the RFP.

Gene Crick (1999) of MAIN prefers to see the proverbial glass as half full:

TIF doesn’t build the whole community. But the other side of that is that you have to start somewhere, and the legislators in 1995 who approved the fund, it was easier to sell and quite defensible to start with kids and start with education and start with libraries. To me, it could be argued as a question of priorities. Let’s devote it to these, and make sure that those don’t get overlooked, and then perhaps we can grow from there.

Local Telecommunications Policy

Austin's local telecommunications policy has been driven by three goals:

1. Developing a broadband communications capability for businesses, residences, and institutions
2. Deploying broadband technologies within city government to improve efficiency
3. Promoting access to information technologies to the low-income population

The first goal is being pursued through a proposed franchise agreement with Central and South West Communications (CSWC or CSW Communications). The process began in 1994, when city officials began to consider ways to ensure widespread availability of broadband technologies to all residents of Austin. The city released a request for information (RFI) that asked interested vendors to submit general plans for how they might build a broadband network to every home, business, and institution in Austin. Approaches considered by the City included the following: a partial contribution to the network by the City through a city bond issue; a privately funded plan; and a privately funded plan that would include a contract between a provider of energy management services and the city-owned electric utility. The RFI was re-designated the Request for Strategic Partnership (RFSP). After the RFI elicited favorable responses, the City Council authorized further discussions with interested vendors, and the City released a Request for Strategic Partnership (RFSP). Eventually, the City settled on CSWC, since it was the only respondent that did not ask the City for a financial contribution to its plan. Moreover, since the Texas Legislature has made it illegal in (House Bill 2128) for any municipality to own or operate a communications utility, the City felt it was necessary to avoid any financial contribution that might be construed as giving the City operating authority over the network. Thus, the City settled on the traditional franchise approach in pursuing a broadband network: a private company (in this case CSWC) pays a 5 percent franchise fee as compensation for use of the public's right-of-way.

The second goal is being met through development of the Greater Austin Area Telecommunications Network (GAATN), an alliance of seven public entities in Austin that is building a broadband network for so-called "bureaucrat to bureaucrat" communication. The entities are the city of Austin, Travis County, Austin Community College, the Lower Colorado River Authority, the State of Texas, Austin Independent School District, and the University of Texas. The fiber-optic network is under construction by Southwestern Bell and will link all participating public institutions by the time it is completed.

The third goal is most relevant to this paper, but it is also connected to the other goals, especially the first. As city staff began to develop plans for providing broadband to the home, it occurred to them that making public information available electronically did not translate into equal access for all citizens. Those able to afford home computers and with the skills needed to use network services would be at a distinct advantage when

compared with those without such equipment or skills. Recognition of these potential inequities led to the establishment of the Austin Free-Net, described in the next section.

AUSTIN'S COMMUNITY TECHNOLOGY PROGRAMS

The Austin Free-Net

The Austin Free-Net (AFN) is the focal point for community computing activities. AFN was initiated in 1995, after a group of city executives focusing on technology applications issued a report, in January of that year, recommending that the City look at the Internet from three different foci: 1) to have a Web site and provide interactive services; 2) to provide all city staff with access to the Internet in order to improve services; 3) to provide universal public access. The City created the Austin City Connection Web site in February 1995. Next, the city manager reassigned Sue Beckwith, who served on that initial panel, to create AFN to address the third focus. Beckwith served as AFN's first director. Beckwith (1999) says that this move was "really unusual. . . I would like to think that the city actually cared about the base premise that it's really important for everybody to have access. So the original rationale was probably part that, part political."

AFN's mission is to "provide Internet-connected computers and training in public spaces for the greater benefit of all residents. In looking at barriers to access to information, the AFN discovered that the main barriers in Austin are not related to cost per month for connectivity, but rather to equipment cost and training" (AFN 1999). With this orientation, AFN represents a departure from the traditional free-net approach, which had been advocated by the National Public Telecomputing Network (NPTN). NPTN was a nonprofit organization, founded in Cleveland, that assisted communities in organizing their own free-nets.¹ It generally fostered dial-up connectivity for community users and began by using very basic software for e-mail access in order to encourage community interaction. In contrast, the AFN's orientation has been 1) to provide public access sites for Internet and World Wide Web access; and 2) to increase emphasis on training.

Compared with other free-nets, AFN pays little attention to the content of the server. Therefore, AFN fits better with the community technology center model than with the traditional free-net model, illustrating once again that the original categories derived to label and make sense of community technology organizations have begun to bleed into each other.

The Austin free-net's focus on training sets it somewhat apart from many other free-nets. This focus emanates from a philosophy that information technology, while daunting to many people initially, can easily become less intimidating—for young people and older people—as long as training takes place in a comfortable user environment. Thus the AFN's activities occur in community centers, job training sites, churches, and schools. One hoped-for outcome of conducting training in public spaces is that it will bring people together. Ana Sisnett (1999), the second and current director of AFN, explains:

¹ NPTN is now defunct and has been basically replaced by CTCNet.

We're able to teach our classes in public spaces without charging, able to provide a number of services without charging, and I think it's important to keep it that way. And the advantage is that by coming out to these public spaces, people are able to meet each other and find out other things that are going on in their community. So, you know, it is a part of community-building, and I think we made that spin an essential part of what Austin free-net does. You know, not so much the technology. But really doing community services, and really building.

Sisnett joined AFN in 1997 to help establish the East Austin Community Network (EACN), which targets IT needs in the low-income area of East Austin. Denise Guckert was the co-coordinator. EACN was established with a TIAP grant. TIAP is over, but the project continues. EACN currently operates nine locations and offers classes in the Internet and Web page creation in both English and Spanish. Community members also come to the main lab to write resumes, surf the Internet, and do word processing.

A final element of AFN's activities involves the great demand for its services. The summer computer camps for low-income children in East Austin serve about 80 kids, but could easily serve three times that number, according to Sue Beckwith. Similarly, an East Austin Internet fair, called "Nothin' but Free-Net" held in November 1996 (in conjunction with the AFN, Austin CableVision, Southwestern Bell, and the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas) had a turnout of 200 people, well in excess of planners' expectations.

The Austin Free-Net is now a contractor for the city of Austin; it has a contract with the City for the library and community network piece, and a contract with the police department for providing Internet access at the community police stations. The combined budget is approximately \$130,000 per year. However, its efforts are constrained by its modest cash flow (which sometimes make equipment maintenance difficult) and strained by the community's desire to avail itself of AFN's services. As demand grows for AFN's services, managing its growth, or searching for alternative means to meet community needs, will be a challenge.

Austin Learning Academy

The Austin Learning Academy (ALA) focuses on literacy and education. ALA is a nonprofit organization that uses teachers from the Austin Independent School District (AISD) to develop curriculum and provide training for after-school and summer programs. It began to integrate technology into its programs in 1988. ALA began as an after-school program of learning centers in public housing developments, and later began to serve more adults with GED and ESL programs. Although its original activities targeted children, the ALA always intended to draw in adults.

The philosophy of ALA is one of empowerment and of providing the community with the tools it needs to do for itself. According to Tony Cherian (1999), Technology Support Specialist for ALA, "You see what needs to be done, then you learn how to do it yourself. . . Once one person has the know-how, you share it amongst yourselves, you know? So you build up this bank of knowledge within your community."

ALA offers GED and ESL programs at seven schools and public housing developments in low-income neighborhoods. Programs for youth and for adults

complement each other. Students often bring their children with them to class, and so the organizers realized that they had an opportunity to serve another important segment of the community, its youth.

ALA initiated its Family CARE (Computer Assembly Refurbishment and Enhancement) program two years ago for children aged 11 through 15. In this program, young people learn how to build and maintain computers. The computers are then used in community computing centers. Last summer, participants in this program were paid through a city internship program; most used the money they earned to build their own computers. ALA has also initiated a college and career preparatory program for the same age group. A key component of both of these youth-centered programs is that the older children teach and mentor the younger ones. In order to participate in CARE, children are required to have a parent or other adult participate with them. ALA sees the family as the fundamental building block of the community, and it organizes its programs around this premise.

In addition to—and perhaps more important than—the skills CARE participants learn, ALA staff emphasize the confidence-building aspect of the program. Of working with technology in general, Toni Williams (1999) says: “Once you learn [computers]—overcoming that fear gives you confidence to go on and accomplish more.”

ALA views technology as a tool that facilitates the work it was already doing. ALA staff and volunteers are quick to point out the difference between organizations that were created in order to provide access to IT and others, like ALA, that already existed and use technology in order to promote community development and political organization. Lodis Rhodes, a University of Texas professor who works with ALA, says that “Computers are a hook. They get people interested. We’re trying to build social capital in [these neighborhoods] using the idea of technology as a way, kind of as an excuse for getting people together.” ALA teaches skills and provides material to individuals, but the emphasis on the community is always present. “Individual competence is not enough,” says Rhodes. “It’s community competence” (1999).

Although Rhodes and the ALA staff downplay the importance of computers to their program, ALA is the only organization in Austin that has integrated technology so completely into its curriculum. According to Belinda Rojas (1999), “A component of our family literacy is technology, and in the adult education classes, the technology takes on a form that is integrated with the learning that is going on in the classroom. It is not a separate kind of class where they go to learn keyboarding—no, it’s integrated with what’s going on in the classroom.”

ALA’s “whole family” concept also draws on technology. Toni Williams (1999) explains that “It’s become a situation where we have teens and children that are working on technology together. . . . And if you look at computers, they are something that’s going to be around forever.” “We’re going to take them from womb to tomb!” exclaims Belinda Rojas (1999).

Rhodes (1999) asserts that “Computers are a tool that helps ALA change the least common denominator of people gathered in a place ‘from race or neighborhood or something’ to ‘we want to learn about computers’ or ‘we want to start a business,’ and then it’s much more. It’s a better dynamic.” One way ALA uses this tool is to bring people together who do not normally come together or “who would not normally come

together under the circumstances of equals.” ALA endeavors to create “bridging social capital”—social capital that creates connections between groups that were previously disconnected. This effort offers potential benefits for the entire community.

Metropolitan Austin Interactive Network

The Metropolitan Austin Interactive Network (MAIN) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is “to establish and operate efficiently a community-access computer network.” According to its Web site, MAIN’s purpose “is information sharing and communication among the people and governmental, educational, commercial, cultural, religious, and civic organizations, in order to enhance lives and make the best use of community resources.”

The founding president of MAIN was Sue Soy, a librarian who moved to Austin from Los Angeles in 1991 and was surprised to learn that there was no community network in the city. Soy established MAIN working with other librarians. Others soon joined in. MAIN delivers content to the community through the community-based organizations (CBOs) that MAIN links and hosts. Close to 500 CBOs participate in the network.

Since its inception, MAIN has been run almost completely by volunteers; it has, essentially, no budget. Soy (1999) explains, “When we need something, we ask for it and we always have a good case. We target very carefully whoever we’re going to ask for a donation, and we get it.” Sun Microsystems donated MAIN’s server and provides system administration, so the MAIN people never see their own server.

In 1998, a telecommunications ruling in the courts led to the creation of the Telecommunications Resource Center (TCRC), a spinoff of MAIN and the creation of current MAIN director, Gene Crick. Crick plans to use the \$250,000 from the ruling to fund efforts to provide statewide access to TCRC. The TCRC Web site states that “the fundamental TCRC objective is encouragement and support for locally directed Internet projects in Texas. . . especially those communities in rural and underserved areas.” The primary strategy is “using the many resources already available from public and private organizations, supplementing those existing resources, where needed, with planning and consulting services as well as financial support.” According to Soy (1999),

We’ve taken this windfall chunk of money that came our way and tried to leverage it to grow more money so that we could use it not to just buy equipment and one-time things but leverage it into education and training and spread it across the state so that others can just keep growing with it. Because that’s what seems to happen; you train one person and they train three more.

AIR Austin (Accessibility Internet Rally) is another project that grew out of MAIN and was supported by Knowbility, Inc. AIR Austin is based on the Web-raising concept, but occurs on a larger scale and for the specific purpose of making Austin “the most awake and aware web-design city when it comes to making Web design for people with disabilities happen” (Soy 1999). In 1999, AIR Austin’s second year, the goal was to

get city government involved and, in fact, Mayor Watson and Congressman Lloyd Doggett shared the podium to launch the event. Mayor Watson connected the effort immediately with workforce development issues and the City's priority to bring high technology and community together.

Telecommunity Partnership Initiative

In 1998, the city of Austin issued an RFP to create a technology-focused workforce development program. Both AFN and the Capital Area Training Foundation (CATF) responded and, although AFN had a much longer history of IT programming, CATF was awarded the contract. The Telecommunity Partnership Initiative (TPI) is a city-funded collaboration between CATF and AISD/Travis High School. TPI is "designed to provide free community access to computer technology, enhance employability and technology skills of individuals, promote community awareness of and comfort with emerging technology, and assist with job search and job placement" (Capital Areas Training Foundation 1999).

This initiative is in its first phase and currently targets East and South Austin. Course offerings range from introductory level (using a computer for the first time) to advanced level (database software, Java, etc). Although TPI is still very new, classes have begun to fill up and to draw a wide range of participants. In addition to computer training, TPI includes work-readiness training, and it matches graduates with unpaid internships.

PARTNERSHIPS

The community technology efforts (IT efforts) described in the preceding section partner with other actors—such as city government and the university—and with each other. This section groups the partnerships into these two categories.

Partnerships with Other Actors

City Government

City government has contributed to narrowing the digital divide in several ways, including the donation of a city employee to the Free-Net (AFN's executive director) and support for the East Side Story initiative, a broad economic development effort, strongly supported by the City Council, that allows ALA director Toni Williams to lead training initiatives for the summer computer camp and other training programs. In addition, the City's internship program pays advanced participants in the Family CARE program for the work they do to build and maintain public access computers. City money funds both AFN and TPI.

Public Libraries

AFN provides public access to all Austin and Cedar Park public libraries. As part of this project, which began in 1996, AFN installs and provides technical support for computers in library locations. AFN also conducts training sessions with library staff. As of May 1999, monthly usage of the library machines averaged 17,000 people. AFN has 150 computers, printers, and other equipment in the 21 libraries in which it works.

East Austin Community Network

In partnership with 10 nonprofit and city of Austin facilities, AFN provides Internet access, technical support, and training in East Austin. This project was established in 1997 with TIAP funds. As of May 1999, AFN continues to support these locations with connectivity, equipment, technical support and training.

COPS

COPS was a pilot project to enhance Austin's community policing efforts and to engage citizens and Austin Police Department (APD) District Representatives at neighborhood stations. This partnership between AFN and APD was funded by the Department of Justice/COPS. It established public access sites and training in six APD locations and four police substations.

Southeast Austin Community Youth Development Project

AFN describes itself as "a small partner in this large-scale effort to reduce juvenile crime in the 78744 zip code." Four schools, wired by AFN, began after-school programs in September 1996.

Private Sector

AFN also has had a close working relationship with the private sector, working in cooperation with Austin CableVision, Southwestern Bell, Applied Materials, Advanced Micro Devices, and SEMATECH. OuterNet Internet Solutions, Inc. and several Internet service providers also provide technical support for the Free-Net and donate e-mail accounts for small public access sites and special functions.

MAIN works regularly with the Austin Multimedia Alliance (AMA) on Web-raising. MAIN's Web-raising pair nonprofit organizations with experts from AMA to create Web sites for the organizations. The nonprofit organizations are invited on a weekend day to bring their materials. MAIN supplies the site and the food, and the AMA experts donate their time and expertise.

High-tech corporations have provided support to the community technology efforts, but it has not been consistent. One interviewee said, "It's like, they gave you the stuff, now get out of here. And then they're on to the next thing that will get them in the newspaper, the next media splash."

The University of Texas at Austin

The university has been a very important partner for ALA. Lodis Rhodes and another professor, Gary Chapman, have taught several year-long studio classes on the issue of community computing at the LBJ School of Public Affairs. These classes have helped to funnel resources of professors' and students' time and expertise toward this issue. Chapman (1999) says, "We were trying to find ways to give our graduate students experience in developing community networking activities, but also to look at it from a researching standpoint, so that we could understand better what was the optimum way that technology buys into communities."

In 1996, the university established the Telecommunications and Information Policy Institute (TIPI) in response to telecommunications opportunities in Texas. TIPI provided a forum for university faculty conducting telecommunications-related research to come together and discuss their work. TIPI faculty also assist in the design and implementation of the policy analysis and research initiatives of the institute. The other goal, according to Sharon Strover (1999), a member of TIPI faculty, "is to try to bring some of the university-based expertise—what we do now—out to a user community, whether it's the policymakers, community groups, state agencies, or you name it."

Austin Independent School District (AISD)

ALA partners with the AISD for facilities and employs many AISD teachers to teach its classes. Offering adult classes brings parents into the schools and places them in closer contact with their children and with teachers and principals. ALA staff believe that their programs work in concert with the public school system's programs. Toni Williams (1999) explains:

We are enhancing their program because we do early childhood programming, preparing the children for [AISD's] kinder program. And our kids are coming in a whole lot more prepared for their programs. . . So, I think the school district feels as if we are really important to them because we're doing some things as far as reaching community and parents that they could not reach otherwise.

TPI also partners with AISD: current programming takes place in AISD's Dawson High School.

Partnerships between IT Efforts

MAIN and AFN

MAIN and AFN worked together when each was seeking grant money given by the State Library. The two organizations submitted separate grant proposals, but each served on the other's team. Both received funding AFN placed 52 terminals in Austin public libraries and MAIN funded access points in 28 small rural libraries outside Austin. Together, the organization brought Internet access to 65% of the public libraries in central

Texas. According to Sue Soy (1999), that partnership “was just, I think, visionary people trying to piece things together.”

MAIN and ALA

MAIN and ALA are working together to train ALA volunteers from the University of Texas to conduct Web-raising. ALA staff and volunteers are learning this skill so that they can provide it to CBOs in ALA target neighborhoods.

AFN and ALA

AFN has worked with several community groups in East Austin (the low-income area of Austin) to implement the training program. The Free-Net provides computers and other equipment, while the Austin Learning Academy (ALA) and the Neighborhood Longhorns program provide teachers and trainers for the camp.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT THIS CASE?

Commitment from the Public Sector

In 1995, the city of Austin assigned a group of city executives to study technology issues. Compared with other cities, Austin got an early start in addressing these issues. In addition, the city is relatively wealthy and can afford to fund efforts that other cities consider a luxury. When the City reassigned Sue Beckwith to initiate AFN, there was very little city monitoring. Sue Beckwith (1999) describes her relationship with Betty Dunkerley, the city financial manager, as follows: “She trusts me enough, and trusts Ana enough to let us do whatever we feel is needed. You know, and her question to us is, ‘How much money do you need and “Can you find other funding sources?’”

This trust has enabled Beckwith and Sisnett to experiment without worrying too much about having their funding cut if they make a misstep. The City demonstrated its continued support for IT access initiatives with the funding of TPI, described earlier.

City Activism

Austin has a history of progressive government and an activist citizenry. Strover claims that “what makes Austin unique is that there are people who still move, act, feel from the heart. All communities have those people, really, but I think there’s a critical mass here.” Sisnett (1999) adds:

In Austin, people do have a sense of community. It’s always been the thing that’s struck me long before being involved with this, that we can go to any of the restaurants around here and there will be city council people having lunch, there will be city council people at any of the events that anybody would go to. You know them personally. And people do political work. They work on neighborhood issues, you know? I think that’s why it’s easy to sell. People are very supportive.

Importance of the High-Tech Sector

Although many of the community technology activists interviewed claimed that being in a high-tech city does not help them very much, it is clear that certain things happen because of the high-tech environment. For example, Sue Soy obtained MAIN's server partly because she happened to be on a panel with a vice-president from Sun Microsystems. In addition, because it is such a technology-driven place, the Austin citizenry understands why access to IT is important. People therefore support public efforts to fund such activities. They also donate their own time, which helps some of these organizations operate.

Cooperation between IT Efforts

Austin is a place that is large enough to support several community technology efforts, yet small enough so that people tend to know each other. The people who run and staff IT organizations have paths that tend to cross each other. Although some cities have organizations that compete with each other, Austin organizations tend to collaborate. Sisnett (1999) explains:

The organizations themselves have been finding themselves collaborating in ways they didn't expect to. Like in East Austin, that's happening a whole lot, and it really doesn't have a whole lot to do with the actual Internet and all of that, but with sharing resources, sharing spaces you know, making do better with what they have. So, one of the locations, for example, set out to be a media lab for young people; it's now housing a charter school for high schoolers. So they have computer access, and the charter school has more computers.

At the same time, getting to a place of mutual understanding and collaboration has not always been smooth. Gene Crick (1999) describes the early phase of MAIN's relationship with AFN as follows:

. . . We just sat down, we disagreed and puffed and pouted, and then agreed and sympathized and became damned good friends. . . Anyway, we sort of redirected our missions to be consistent. MAIN took emphasis on content for community organizations as our city mission. . . We donated our terminals in the city to the Austin Free-Net. And the Free-Net is a unified project focusing primarily but not exclusively on connectivity and training and some other things going on.

Austin is a big, small town—big enough to have sufficient resources to address access to IT, but small enough so that people are connected. These connections appear in story after story told by community technology activists. For example, Sue Beckwith describes how she located the EACN in a city facility that also houses the NAACP and an employment and training center: “That happened because I knew people who had control and authority over the physical space.”

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Funding

Funding stability is a problem common to CBOs, and Austin's community technology programs are no stranger to this concern. Although the city seems to be committed to AFN for the foreseeable future, it needs more money to accomplish its mission. ALA won a TIIAP grant in 1997, but now suffers from lack of funding. Asked about funding, Williams replied, "We pray that we have enough money to do it. And right now, our prayers aren't being answered." Connie Seibert (1999) agrees:

We have the recipe and it's working. We're reaching 150 to 200 families; we could just as easily, if we had the money, reach twice or three or four times that . . . Hey, you're bitching and moaning that you don't have enough skilled workers for these positions that are opening up. Give us the cash and we'll train them. We're doing it right now for nothing.

Integration of Efforts

Although cooperation is noted above as one of the unique strengths of the Austin community information technology effort, more could be accomplished in this area. The relatively small size and character of Austin have fostered significant collaboration and cooperation; however, community technology efforts are still somewhat fragmented. Staff between existing organizations believe that the City could do more to broker relationships and to help them find resources.

Meeting the Demand

Staff at all of the organizations described in this chapter discussed the challenge of serving those who lack access to information technology. As the Internet becomes even more important in the mainstream, and as familiarity with IT becomes a requirement for an even broader range of jobs, demands for services will undoubtedly increase. The challenge to meet this demand is clearly linked to the funding challenge noted above. Addressing these challenges will require strong and consistent will on the part of nonprofit organizations, policymakers, and corporations.