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Success Story

Ohio's Latest Model Center Relates to Residents to Recognize the Right Resources

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Cleveland, OH—Most Neighborhood Networks center directors will agree that two key ingredients for the creation of a successful center are resources and time. For Iris Anderson, director of the Arbor Park Village Technology and Information Literacy Initiative (TILI) Learning Center, securing resources has become a relatively simple task thanks to the support of a league of community partners. Finding enough time in the day to get it all done has proven to be a little more difficult. However, if there is a way to add a few more hours to the day, Anderson will find it. After all, it was Anderson's enthusiasm, dedication, and creative problem solving that allowed the Arbor Park Village TILI Learning Center to become the latest Ohio Neighborhood Networks center to achieve Model center classification in July 2009.

Resources for Residents

When Anderson assumed directorship of the Arbor Park Village TILI Learning Center in 2006, she set about securing the resources that would enable the center to offer the programs and services residents need to succeed. To know which resources were needed, Anderson made it a priority to understand the unique needs and goals of the residents the center serves.

"It's our responsibility to learn as much about the residents as we can. If we are going to be successful in supporting self-sufficiency, we need to be aware of what residents are facing beyond the need for employment," says Anderson. "I'm always searching to identify more resident needs because, chances are, there are options and solutions for whatever residents are facing."

Arbor Park Village TILI Learning Center is much more than a community technology center in Anderson's view. The center gives residents the tools they need to secure employment, but Anderson also gives residents hope. It is an important message that she must consistently emphasize for the majority of residents who visit the center.

Partners for Programs

When Anderson started at the center four years ago, she enhanced the strong, mutually beneficial partnerships with Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C), Building Healthy Communities/Sisters of Charity, and Cleveland Reads. Through these partners, the center offers classes and programs that help residents improve their skills, knowledge, and well-being, as well as strengthen family values.

Center partners not only provide programming support, they also offer operational support. For example, Tri-C covers the salaries of Anderson, an additional instructor, and 25 hours weekly for campus work-study students who assists children and youth with their homework in the afterschool program.

"I could not function without my highly knowledgeable and dedicated staff," states Anderson. "They definitely are key players in making us a successful resident resource."

A Snapshot of Center Programs

The Arbor Park Village TILI Learning Center is open 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday, and it is a hub of activity during that entire time. With 17 computers, the Arbor Park Village TILI Learning Center provides something for residents of all ages.

Adult visitors to the center can choose from a variety of programs and classes. Introductory and intermediate computer classes in Microsoft Word, Excel, and Internet access are offered. The center's computer and workforce development courses run on a six-week cycle. Anderson believes everyone is good at and has a passion for something. She has made it a goal to help residents identify their strengths and interests so she can then help them find and travel the right career path.

"I would like to spend even more time one-on-one with residents to counsel each one personally," explains Anderson. "I have found that job assessments—determining a resident's strengths and aptitude—are as important as job training. Often residents come in during the course of job training or a particularly challenging learning process seeking encouragement. We have a responsibility to really pay attention to the needs of people across the board."

In addition to computer and job skills training for adults, the center offers General Educational Development (GED) tutoring classes. The courses prepare adults for a return to classroom-based learning so they can attend Tri-C and take the actual comprehensive GED preparation course for the test. "Some of the adult residents have been out of school for 10 years or more and may have faced additional life challenges," says Anderson. "For those individuals we need to lay a new foundation for learning."

Much of the center's day is devoted to youth programs, including homework, educational, and afterschool programs that typically run from September through June. Each day, about 35 to 40 children and youth use the facility between 2:30 p.m. and 6 p.m. to complete homework or other educational assignments. Students without homework are required to complete worksheets that reinforce whatever they are currently learning in class. When homework is finished, children and youth can use the computers to visit pre-selected and -approved educational Web sites.

Learning at the Arbor Park Village TILI Learning Center does not end for students with the beginning of summer vacation. During the summer of 2008, Anderson designed a program to teach character-building, research, and technology skills. Children and youth who participated in the program were required to write their names using hieroglyphics, graffiti, and the Microsoft drawing feature. For the hieroglyphics, the students studied ancient and modern-day Egypt and were required to find the country on a map. The class talked about graffiti as a form of expression, and during the conversation, Anderson reinforced the message that students should not engage in the activity. By using the Microsoft drawing feature the students became more adept at the use of technology. About 60 students participated in the program. The popularity of the program suggests that Anderson knows how to make learning both effective and fun.

Specialty Workshops

In addition to educational and workforce development programs, Arbor Park Village TILI Learning Center offers specialty workshops aimed at assessing and meeting the larger needs of residents. One example is a focus group series on healthcare that Arbor Park Village TILI Learning Center conducted in conjunction with Tri-C and Sisters of Charity. The center organized the series to open a long-term dialogue with the healthcare community and to determine how residents view the healthcare environment, how they feel they are treated, and what their doctors are like. A doctor attended and advised the groups about how to interact with their own physicians, the information patients should have, and the questions patients should routinely ask. Residents also learned about other resources to which they have

access. Tri-C has a dental clinic, as well as an established relationship with the world-renowned Cleveland Clinic Minority Health Program.

Time is Elusive

Even with a fair number of resources at her disposal, Anderson still laments that there is not enough time in the day.

"If I could, I would offer more individualized career counseling to help determine the direction each individual should take and I would help them walk the right job path for them," says Anderson. "It is my passion and one size does not fit all. I just need to find more time."

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