The Digital Divide continues to be a fact of life in United States of America, and particularly stands out in the metropolitan area of Chicago.

Many people with considerable resources benefit from desktop and laptop computers, PDA devices, Wi-Fi, Voice-over IP telecommunications, and high-speed Internet, both at work and at home. The capabilities of these solutions position their users with a major competitive advantage, allowing them to make financial transactions, close deals, communicate over great distances, and be entertained with music, games, and streaming video broadcasts. Those without an appreciation for these things or the money to pay for them will not get them.

Understanding and utilizing digital technology is a major advantage for adults and children alike. The Internet is a major source of information and entertainment. It is also a tool for doing business and becoming wealthier. Certain technologies allow for connection to the Internet in a fashion that was unheard of a few years ago, increasing the productivity and effectiveness of company employees.

There is no question that many children rely on their local school system for their primary and/or initial exposure to digital technology. The ability of schools to fulfill this need is correlated to the financial resources of that school system. The money going into a school system is heavily weighted by the resources of the residents of that community. Therefore, a North Shore high school such a New Trier is bound to have many more computers, a much loftier degree of Internet access, and many more information technology educational programs than a public school in Chicago such as Simeon. In other words, if it continues on its current path, the continuation and evolution of The Digital Divide will do little if anything to eliminate the permanent underclass.

Westwood's Anti-Digital Divide Initiative (ADD-IN) addresses a strategy and tactics to reduce (and optimistically eliminate) the digital divide in many underprivileged areas. It is a program that will continue to be adjusted to reflect changes in funding, the environment, the number of committed institutions, and characteristics of the involved organizations.

Goals

The goals of the Anti-Digital Divide Initiative are as follows:

? Deliver up-to-date equipment and devices to children of any age.
 Strategy

The public school system in Chicago and a number of surrounding areas will continue to attempt to deliver information technology to their students. However, it will be impossible for them to totally meet the needs of the students in the same way as their more wealthy neighbors. Also, many of the adults in these less wealthy neighborhoods have limited exposure to digital technology, and there is no way for the school system to reach them.

Therefore, the real key is to expose these populations to information technology through channels other than the school system. A reasonable and readily available channel is a neighborhood public computer center located in a non-threatening facility. Westwood has established partnerships with other companies to open offices that also serve as community centers in various locations in the Chicago area that are under-served. Each Westwood Community Center would be supplied with multiple state of the art computer systems (both MicroSoft and Apple), and high-speed Internet access. Each computer would be equipped with a suite of software, much it educational or productivity based. There would also be numerous peripheral devices and supplementary software.

The process of feeding clients into these facilities would be multifold, but is based on one key characteristic that Westwood possesses today. Key officials of Westwood have working relationships with officials of more than five hundred religious institutions of various denominations in the Chicago area who are in a position to reach out to residents for promoting this program. As a combination of the two decades of experience in ministry, community building, and operating a community development corporation, Westwood’s principals are among the best-qualified individuals in the area to remediate the digital divide.

Ten percent of the funding for this program would come from donations from existing partners who are participating with Westwood in this and related programs, and corporations interested in benefiting from the enhancing of the neighborhoods in which they operate.

Benefits

The benefits of such a program would be as follows:
A public computer center would be available during non-school hours, including evenings and weekends.

A public computer center would be available to adult learners.

Educators would not need to be “certified” teachers, and other regulations that restrict the efforts of the public school system would not apply.

Volunteers with special expertise could be utilized, if needed.

Through the right coordinated program, public computer centers could do a better job of keeping up with, and even stimulating evolving technology than thousands of individuals with limited funds.

Westwood proposes to operate 12 public community centers in Chicago’s historic “Black Metropolis,” an area with a population of more than 3 million people stretching from Bronzeville across Chicago’s South Side and into the South Cook suburbs. This area has a poverty rate more than 1.5 times the national average, and the digital divide is as pronounced here as anywhere in the country. The population is primarily African-American, and Westwood’s centers will be located in areas of concentrated segregation and poverty where the ADD-IN initiative is most needed.

Westwood estimates that this initiative, with a cost of $3 million, will create 75 jobs serving the community and mentoring youths and adults who do not otherwise have access to broadband Internet services, as well as seed numerous micro-enterprises created by PCC participants.