

A mission support tool for

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



UNDERWRITTEN BY



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NPower is a network of independent, locally-based nonprofits providing accessible technology help that strengthens the work of other nonprofits. NPower’s mission is to ensure all nonprofits can use technology to expand the reach and impact of their services. We envision a thriving nonprofit sector in which all organizations have access to the best technology resources and know-how, and can apply these tools in pursuit of healthy, vibrant communities. For more information, visit our website at www.NPower.org



UNDERWRITTEN BY THE SBC FOUNDATION

Welcome to...

“NPower’s Technology Guide for Nonprofit Leaders: A Mission Support Tool for Community Development.” This is one of four “Technology for Leaders” guides published by NPower, a national organization devoted to bringing free or low-cost technology help to nonprofits, and funded by a grant from the SBC Foundation, the philanthropic arm of SBC Communications Inc.

These papers highlight technology innovation in four nonprofit sectors: arts and culture, health and human services, education, and community development. The goal is to inspire nonprofits about *the possibilities of technology as a service delivery tool*, and to provide nonprofit leaders with real-world examples that demonstrate that potential.

Each of these papers offers a roadmap for nonprofit leaders on how to integrate technology into their organizations *confidently and fearlessly*. The roadmap covers the best practice steps involved in deciding how technology can support and enhance direct service delivery, and how a nonprofit executive can evaluate and select the appropriate tools for the job and *implement those tools successfully*. It also provides examples of program-specific solutions, tools and resources that are available to expand the reach and impact of nonprofits’ direct services.

Each paper is meant to be a stand-alone resource for the specific nonprofit sector mentioned. However, leaders in one sector may also find it beneficial to read the papers covering other sectors, as they contain many inspiring anecdotes and case studies.

There are a number of people to thank for their contributions to the Community Development guide. Jaime Greene and Joan Fanning contributed hours of research and writing time. Frank Ordway and Rajinder Heir, consultants in the NPower Network, provided their expertise from working with community development organizations on technology needs. A list of all the contributors to this guide is available in the appendix.

In summary, the information contained in these papers reflects the core of NPower’s mission: to ensure all nonprofits can use technology to expand the reach and impact of their work. We hope that you find this information valuable, and we welcome any comments or questions you may have.

Sincerely,

The NPower Network

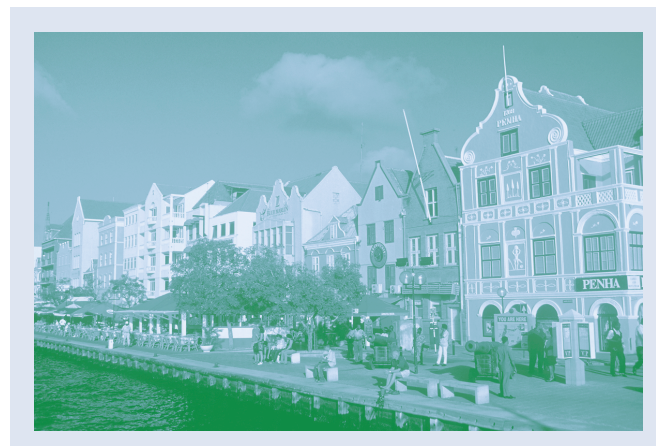
Defining the Community Development Sector

The primary goal of community development is to create a better overall quality of life for everyone in a community. Community development organizations often achieve their mission by addressing issues that affect the entire community, like building affordable housing, calling attention to public safety concerns, and mobilizing people to speak out on local community matters. In addition, many community development organizations offer micro-lending, home-buyer preparation, job training and other services designed to remove barriers to self-sufficiency for low-income individuals and families.

In creating and sustaining livable communities, CDCs need to use every tool at their disposal. Many have become adept at creatively employing financial lending practices to spread the wealth in their communities, and at using community organizing methods to engage and empower residents. In a movement that is well over 40 years old, progressive community development nonprofits are now beginning to turn to technology tools to enhance their services and engage their communities in new ways.

Those working in the community development sector face many challenges, and may view technology as a luxury or as a strictly internal

Community development activities often revolve around housing issues.



organizational tool. While it's true that technology can help organizations run more efficiently, NPower believes that this is only a small part of the picture. Technology can actually have a profound effect on the way an organization achieves its mission, not just on how its staff checks its email or types its documents. Technology can tremendously increase a community development organization's ability to deliver services, can assist staff in reaching more community members, and can even empower community members to improve their own lives.

At NPower, we believe that technology not only helps with internal tasks, but also can be a powerful mission-support tool. We are a nonprofit organization with our own mission – to help other nonprofit organizations find free or low-cost ways to use technology to further their own goals. From our own experience working with community development organizations, we know that technology can be a powerful tool for community-based organizations.

This paper is meant to inspire you, the community development leader, to use technology in innovative ways to further your own organization's mission. We will provide you with some examples of community development groups that are using technology to assist their organizations, and we will offer our own advice and perspective on ways technology can improve your community.

It's important to remember that the goal of this paper is not to sell you the newest technology gadgets, or to dangle unattainable technology goals before you. Our goal is to inspire you to look at technology in a new way – as a powerful, practical, attainable way to help you assist others.

Details about the Community Development Sector

Community development is not a single activity that looks the same from city to city or even from neighborhood to neighborhood. It is a dynamic array of methods designed to enrich people's lives and promote the common good. These activities often revolve around housing issues, such as developing or renovating affordable housing, preparing people for home ownership, or offering a variety of support services, such as job training or locating childcare. The ultimate goal of these diverse projects is to build healthy communities by helping families and individuals afford the homes in which they live.

Technology can have a profound effect on the way your organization achieves its mission.

To better understand the community development sector as a whole, it is helpful to examine some of the features that are characteristic of a wide variety of community development organizations. Typically, these organizations are physically present in the community they serve and are often led directly by those living in the community or by other local stakeholders. As a result, these nonprofits have first-hand knowledge of the assets, aspirations and barriers within their communities.

Ronald Ferguson and William Dickens, in the introduction to their book, *“Urban Problems and Community Development,”* spell out five dimensions of assets associated with successful community development. These five types of community development capital, explored in detail below, are physical, human and intellectual, social, financial, and political.

Physical capital

The community development sector provides a wide variety of services to its local community, but the sector is primarily focused on the creation of new and renovated physical capital in the communities it serves. New houses are built, old homes renovated, community centers created and run-down business districts re-energized.

Community development organizations do not create this physical capital in a vacuum, but rather they target their efforts in neighborhoods where that work will be multiplied by the efforts of others. For example, the Southwest Detroit Business Association (SDBA) implements a comprehensive economic development strategy to revitalize communities in southwest Detroit. It delivers its mission by following the **National Main Street** model, which emphasizes storefront design and renovation, clean and safe activities, small business technical assistance, marketing and promotion of their commercial district, community-based land use planning and advocacy, and real estate development.

The efforts of SDBA result in what its staff calls “the ripple effect.” Once SDBA has completed a project in a given community, the visible improvement in that neighborhood encourages other landowners and potential businesses to invest in the community as well, building momentum for large-scale neighborhood revitalization. SDBA has documented the ways in which its efforts to revitalize the community’s physical capital have caused others to make additional investments that otherwise would not have taken place.

Community development organizations target their efforts in neighborhoods where that work will be multiplied.

Human and intellectual capital

Intellectual and human capital can be defined as the skills and knowledge possessed by community members. Community development organizations are experienced and accomplished at helping low-income individuals and families by providing them with resources and training to improve their lives and their neighborhoods.

Assistance provided by community development organizations ranges from basic work skills development, to literacy and technology fluency programs, to homeowner preparation and credit education services.

Hope Communities of Denver, Colorado, delivers on its mission by offering a complete range of trainings and life stabilization services on-site at its managed properties for low-income individuals. Residents have access to English as a Second Language courses, parenting support groups, and leadership courses designed to help them take an active role in changing their community. As a result, individuals are more prepared for employment, home ownership, and familial stewardship.



Housing organizations help individuals prepare for home ownership.

Social capital

The social capital of a community includes goodwill, optimism, trust, shared ties and understanding, and a feeling that community members can influence change. Community development organizations strengthen the social capital of neighborhoods by encouraging a variety of activities that allow local citizens to positively impact their local community.

T.R. Hoover of Dallas, Texas, not only fosters the development of affordable housing in one of Dallas' most impoverished neighborhoods, but also offers programs that increase community involvement to improve the quality of life for its residents. Through its community center, T.R. Hoover organizes neighborhood watch and neighborhood clean-up efforts, youth-elderly and elderly-youth mentoring programs, and spiritual and political activities. These efforts have reduced crime, increased property values and improved the awareness and ability of local citizens to positively impact their surroundings.

Financial capital

Another facet of community development is helping individuals manage and develop personal wealth in order to strengthen the financial vitality of their overall community. Community development organizations work to ensure that individuals, families, and small businesses can access the resources they need to own property or become financially stable. They do this by offering first-time homebuyer programs, small business incubation programs, and individual and small business budgeting assistance.

Another major component of the work performed by many community development organizations is procuring financial capital for local projects. By pursuing grants from local, state, and federal sources, as well as from private foundations and local banks, community development organizations bring financial capital to neighborhoods that otherwise wouldn't receive it. This capital results in housing production, increases the availability of home and small business loans, and addresses urban and neighborhood blight.

Organizations like Homesight in Seattle, Washington, procure capital resources from a variety of sources. Homesight uses this capital to acquire building sites, construct homes and provide loans to low-income individuals who complete their first-time homebuyer program. Homesight's success in these areas has increased the overall viability and economic opportunity in the communities it serves. During the decade since Homesight was founded, it has facilitated the direct investment of over \$40 million into communities, as well as creating more than 1,100 new homeowners and providing direct services to over 20,000 households.

“Over the years, these [community development] nonprofits have produced more than half a million units of housing, created over a quarter of a million jobs, and brought countless numbers of people into the economic mainstream through job-training programs, almost \$2 billion in loans, and advocacy for community reinvestment.”

Coming of Age, The Achievements of Community-Based Development Organizations

Political capital

Political capital is defined as a community's ability to exert its political influence. Community development organizations educate people about the political process and their rights, helping individuals and communities increase their impact on the political process.

Formed in 1984, Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) facilitates the involvement of the people it serves directly into the political arena and influences the local policy decisions that impact low-income and homeless families. For example, CCH hosts a Legislative Action Day to bring community members into the governance environment. Events like this help to demystify the political process and give individuals experience in meeting legislators, preparing and providing testimony, and speaking out on issues that affect their local community.

In addition to helping community members build their political capital, community development organizations also utilize their own political capital to further their missions of building stronger communities. Efforts like producing and managing housing as well as preparing first-time buyers for home ownership put community development organizations in continual contact with local and regional political institutions. These connections allow community development organizations to impact local zoning and taxation policies that facilitate their efforts, as well as to pursue federal and state appropriations that support their work.

When building these assets in communities nationwide, community development groups will face challenges to overcome as well as new opportunities. In the next section, we will look at these and consider ways that technology can be an effective tool in making the most of opportunities and mitigating barriers.



Because of their political connections, community development organizations impact local zoning and taxation policies.

Community development groups have first-hand knowledge of the assets, aspirations and barriers within their communities.

Challenges and opportunities

Community development organizations, like other nonprofits, are increasingly asked to do more with fewer resources. In this environment, there is growing pressure to have a greater impact in the community, conduct operations more efficiently, and transform the lives of more individuals in the community. As a sector, community development has unique opportunities and challenges that can affect how well organizations meet the demands of strengthening organizational effectiveness, gaining efficiencies and empowering people to help themselves.

Technology can be an important tool for mitigating or better managing these challenges as well as for leveraging the possibilities.

Strengthening organizational effectiveness

Community-based groups are constantly looking for ways to increase the quality and impact of their work. Such a group's organizational effectiveness – its ability to accomplish its mission and make a positive impact on the community it serves – can be improved in a number of ways. Community

All nonprofits are under increasing pressure from funders and donors to better measure outcomes of their services.



development organizations can avoid re-inventing the wheel by learning from others in the community development sector.

Whenever possible, they can collaborate with community partners to combine resources and increase the scope of their work. They can develop systems for measuring and reporting the outcomes, and they can identify compelling ways to demonstrate the need for and impact of their services within the community. In each of these endeavors, technology can serve as a powerful tool to community development organizations seeking to strengthen their organizational effectiveness.

Sharing best practices

After over 40 years of organizing communities, advocating for positive change, and building stronger neighborhoods, the community development movement can share lessons learned and best practices for organizational effectiveness. A community development nonprofit can become more effective in delivering its mission by learning from others in the field.

Fortunately, community development has a well-established network of intermediaries positioned to help strengthen individual groups as well as the sector as a whole. Organizations like the Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC), The Enterprise Foundation, and Fannie Mae build the organizational capacity of nonprofits focused on community development through a wide range of support, including assistance in the form of training and information services. In working with an array of community development organizations, these intermediaries are able to extract from the field what is working well, in addition to some hard-earned lessons. These best practices and learning materials are freely shared through searchable, online databases.

Whether starting new services, reviving a struggling program, or trolling for new ideas, the LISC Online Resource Library, Enterprise Resource Database, and KnowledgePlex should be included among a nonprofit's first stops on the information highway. Knowing how to search the body of knowledge that already exists allows organizations to build on past success without re-inventing the wheel.

In addition to capturing knowledge in writing, technology makes gathering knowledge from others more accessible. Online discussion forums, Web-enabled conference calls, and Webcasts of training sessions and presentations bring information to life despite geographic boundaries.

Community development organizations can avoid re-inventing the wheel by learning from others in the community development sector.

CASE STUDY: The Enterprise Foundation

www.enterprisefoundation.org

Catherine Hyde, director of knowledge sharing at The Enterprise Foundation, shares this story about the effectiveness of using the Web for gathering information:

“I was at a conference, in an expo booth promoting a variety of tools from The Enterprise Foundation. A director at a community-based organization came up and asked if we had anything on strategic plans, since his organization needed to do one and they had never done one before. I took him to the Enterprise Resource Database (ERD), typed “strategic plan” into the search box, and a list of 22 resources on building a strategic plan came up. He was wowed, and felt so much more confident knowing he could access these resources so quickly and easily.

“That’s ERD at its best: helping people find just what they need, right when they need it. We compare it to everyone’s favorite source of information: asking an experienced co-worker who is right down the hall. Only unlike that co-worker, ERD is never out of the office and never too busy to help.”

Collaborating with others

With help from technology, community development nonprofits have extraordinary opportunities to learn from others. The community development movement gets its support from a complex web of for-profit and government stakeholders at local, regional and national levels. To be effective, community development nonprofits often need to have strong working relationships with a range of external partners. While working in partnership can be challenging, technology such as email and websites helps strengthen communication.

When partnerships require the actual sharing of documents and collaborating on work products, technology is an important tool to consider. Collaboration software makes it possible to easily share documents and a calendar of events with groups outside your organization. Collaboration tools are also useful when staff members for the same organization work from multiple locations.

Measuring outcomes

Like all nonprofits, community development organizations are under increasing pressure from funders and donors to better measure the outcomes of their services. Technology can help them do this. For example, automated client tracking systems can support the work of community development nonprofits by providing the organization with important information about the people they are serving and the impact of their services. Client tracking can:

- Organize information that needs to be captured.
- Capture information consistently.
- Automate routine tasks and make good use of teamwork.
- Assist analysis of capacity, effort and effectiveness.
- Enable easy communication and sharing of best practice service delivery process.

The Workforce Board of Northern Cook County employment and training center in Park Ridge, Illinois, created an Agency Referral Network to facilitate collaboration among local workforce development organizations. These organizations use a common employer contact database, which ensures that every service provider has the most up-to-date information. Participating organizations can readily identify services for their clients, and if they choose to refer a client to another organization, the referral is tracked and the outcome is reported back to the referring organization. Using this tool improves the quality of service delivered to clients, and assists member organizations with reporting.

For more information on implementing a client tracking system, see NPower's "Technology Guide for Nonprofit Leaders: A Mission Support Tool for Health and Human Services."



Community development groups need to demonstrate how they are addressing community needs.

CASE STUDY: Rock Falls Community Development Corporation

www.rockfalls61071.com/Econdev.htm

Rock Falls Community Development Corporation of Rock Falls, Illinois, created a web-enabled database to track workforce information in the greater Rock Falls community. Rock Falls CDC created the database using internationally recognized data collection standards, making it easy for multiple organizations to automatically upload their data. The system also contains a variety of online tools, such as a local utility calculator, which allow economic development organizations and potential investors to accurately estimate the costs and benefits they would incur by investing in a given region.

The database captures data on the local labor force (such as worker skillsets, availability, average wage rates, commuting patterns, etc.), regional quality of life, available buildings and properties, and potential business development incentives. Workforce development organizations use this data to gain a better understanding of community needs and to strategically target their services. Meanwhile, business and economic development organizations also use the data to provide potential investors with detailed information on regional workforce conditions.

Demonstrating need

Finally, one of the most compelling ways a community development nonprofit can be more effective is to show the need for, or impact of, services in a meaningful way. Demonstrating needs within a community and showing the dynamic nature of how services can affect that community are considerable challenges. Technology offers a few tools that, when innovatively used, can help bring needs and impact to life.

Mapping technology, or Geographic Information Systems (GIS), can be a powerful tool with a range of applications. At its most simplistic, GIS can combine information about where a target group of clients live and work, or the service area for a nonprofit, and overlay that information with the demographics of the area to demonstrate a growing need for services or funding.

GIS can also be a complex statistical tool that requires collaboration and considerable investment. For example, Kansas City LISC contracted with the University of Missouri at Kansas City's Center for Economic Information to develop a sophisticated GIS database that tracks indicators of neighborhood health. The database, compiled through Kansas City's CD2000 community development capacity-building initiative, indicates the health of the neighborhood's housing market, real and perceived changes in crime, and business activity. Data sources include Home Mortgage Disclosure Act data, census data, crime statistics, and a variety of neighborhood surveys. Every five years, a complete survey of every block in the urban core will collect statistics on housing conditions, public infrastructure, and litter. This data will be used to assess the impact of the community development organizations and to allow funders and the public to see what differences their services have made.

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can combine information about a nonprofit's service area, or where a target group of clients live and work, and overlay that information with the demographics of the area to demonstrate a growing need for services or funding.

CASE STUDY: Southwest Detroit Business Association (SDBA) www.southwestdetroit.com

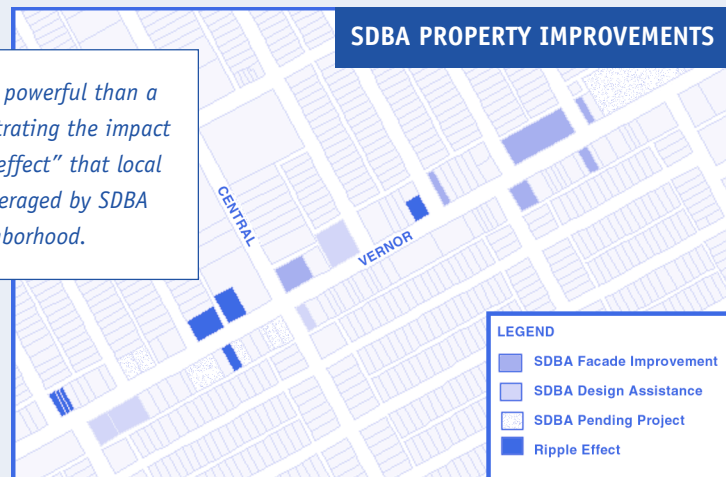
The Southwest Detroit Business Association (SDBA) observed a “ripple effect” in its community when SDBA property revitalization projects encouraged other investors to invest in the same neighborhood. To document its efforts, SDBA compiled a list of all the improved properties in a certain neighborhood. Although the list was helpful in demonstrating the project’s success, showing the properties on a map allowed SDBA to visually represent the neighborhood’s ongoing transformation, telling the story in a much more powerful way.

LIST

SDBA PROPERTY IMPROVEMENTS

- SDBA Façade Improvement: 6 Properties
- SDBA Design Assistance: 4 Properties
- SDBA Pending Project: 8 Properties
- Ripple Effect: 7 Properties

MAP



Technology that can go out into the community is emerging as another innovative tool for dynamically showing a community’s needs. Organizations can use handheld computers like the Palm Pilot to collect information about neighborhood conditions and assets. You can accomplish these efforts using ready-made survey software like The Enterprise Foundation’s Neighborhood Survey Pro. Or you can create your own surveys through software like Pendragon, which allows non-programmers to develop surveys that can be used on handheld devices. To lend credibility to the information gathered, supplement data collected in the neighborhood with digital images of trouble spots or GPS data that pinpoints the exact location.

While handheld devices allow you to collect information without the time-consuming data entry required by a paper system, some groups are using the technology to put the power of change directly into the hands of community members.

City Scan, a project of Connecticut Policy and Economic Council (CPEC), is an independent, nonpartisan and not-for-profit organization that provides information and communication resources to citizens, community leaders, civic organizations and local governments to help set priorities and improve government performance. City Scan uses new technology to empower and involve citizens of all ages in local government.

In City Scan projects, citizens prioritize desired improvements to the physical environment of their community and gather information on how well government services deliver results. City Scan prepares powerful reports and maps using the visual database created from the data collected by residents. Neighborhood groups and local government officials use these reports to discuss problems and find solutions.

Gaining organizational efficiencies

Outside of capital costs, staff salaries are often one of the most significant expenses in a community development nonprofit's budget. Using staff time efficiently on administrative tasks means that more time and resources can be devoted to programs in the community or to building community capital.

Staff can save time by sharing files, schedules, and contact information. Networking technology allows staff to save documents in central locations, and client-server tools like Microsoft Exchange enable staff to more efficiently share calendars and contacts.

When managing more complex relationships or a significant number of contacts, contact management software may be needed. Sharing calendars and contacts are possible even in smaller nonprofits where a complex network and server are not appropriate. These groups often rely on free, Web-based tools like Yahoo Groups to keep information centrally located and accessible.

One wouldn't ask staff to run a meeting with a bullhorn when they need a microphone, nor to renovate a building without a hammer. In community development nonprofits, employees need the right tools for the job. For example, staff may require project management software for drawing up and sharing a construction schedule, property management software for overseeing more than 500 units, or software to manage fundraising efforts or community events.

These tools do not need to be expensive or sophisticated, they just need to get the job done. For example, Del Norte Housing of Denver, Colorado has a program, Savings Plus, designed to help people save for homeownership, college, or a new business using Individual Development Accounts. Del Norte procures matching funds for the accounts from public and private sources, and those funds are specifically for high-return investments such as first-time home ownership, post-high school education and business capitalization. As a result, the organization was looking for software packages to assist with its asset management. The cost and complexity of financial management software like Great Plains were overkill for Del Norte's needs, so it has been successfully using Excel spreadsheets to manage its portfolio.



Simple technology tools can help with tasks like saving money to start a new business.

CASE STUDY: Housing Resource Group

www.hrg.org

Housing Resources Group, a Seattle, Washington, organization devoted to developing and managing affordable housing, found that its technology resources were more often a hindrance than a help.

Like many nonprofits, HRG had computers with a hodgepodge of different operating systems and applications, making collaborative work a constant struggle. Recognizing the toll in frustration and lost productivity, HRG decided to invest in a common operating system (Windows NT) and applications (Office 2000) for all computers.

HRG realized, however, that this investment was only half the equation for success. Without thorough, upfront training, many HRG staff members would struggle with the new tools, which were significantly more advanced than what they had used before. In addition, the organization knew that relying on the ability of people to learn by doing, or to get instruction from more knowledgeable peers, would take too long and be too random to ensure that the technology was maximized as a valuable resource.

As a result, HRG turned to NPower for help in training its staff. After gathering information on HRG's daily operations and conducting a detailed survey among HRG employees, NPower identified HRG's set of "core competencies." NPower then designed a customized program consisting of a set of multi-day trainings on NT, Outlook, Internet Explorer, Word, and Excel. Trainings were further tailored to meet the needs and interests of HRG's basic and advanced users.

"The changes have really made a difference," says HRG's Vaughn McLeod. "Just as you need uniform materials to build a solid house, you need common tools and skills to be a smoothly functioning organization. The trainings zeroed in on just what we needed to know, and were presented with examples very relevant to our ways of working. HRG staff can now function better as a team, rather than a collection of individuals. And this is sure to translate into more results for those who depend on HRG to help keep Seattle a place where people of all economic strata can live and thrive."

By providing thorough training immediately after a technology upgrade, HRG ensured that its staff could maximize their technology resources in order to better serve their community. Furthermore, by creating a customized training plan that was tailored to the way the organization functioned, HRG employees learned exactly what they needed to know without wasting time on information they wouldn't use. In addition, staff members were very receptive to training content and examples that directly applied to their specific work.

Empowering people to help themselves

Community development organizations often grow out of grassroots efforts to make their local area stronger. These organizations have a unique opportunity to build on the trusted relationships they have with community members by guiding them to tools and information that will make a difference in their lives.

Through technology, they can put powerful tools into the hands of the community via the Internet. In communities where residents cannot afford personal computers, community-based organizations can provide public computers at community technology centers, allowing clients to access many empowering technology resources.

Internet tools and content already used by mainstream society can help reduce critical barriers to self-sufficiency. Today many of us employ Internet tools to access financial and educational resources, find important information and services, and make our voices heard on local issues. Community development organizations are often the place people turn to in their community for assistance. These groups have an opportunity — and, in some ways, an obligation — to bring the Internet into the reach of its community members.

Access to financial resources

For working-class families trying to make ends meet, online banking and electronic bill paying can allow them to save time and access funds at odd hours when kids are asleep for the night and banks are typically closed. Many of us are also turning to technology to help us pay taxes.

Many people, however, are not able to afford TurboTax or other software. Now with web-based software like I-CAN! EIC™ (www.icanefile.org), individuals and families can go online for free at community technology centers and respond to straightforward questions in several languages. The results of their answers are pulled together into the appropriate tax forms and can be printed or submitted directly. Many working class families do not have access to the Internet, and as a result libraries, community technology centers, and community development organizations play an important role in making these technology resources available to them.

See Appendices A and B for more information on I-CAN! EIC™ (www.icanefile.org) resources.

Through technology, community development organizations can put powerful tools into the hands of community members via the Internet.

The added benefit of I-CAN! EIC™ is that it prompts families and individuals to apply for tax credits for which they are eligible. For many people, these often-overlooked credits represent money that will make a significant, positive difference in their lives.

Here's another example of how technology can help: A housing organization begins educating residents about direct deposit, online banking and electronic bill paying. It implements an electronic rent payment program and saves staff time spent tracking down late rent payments. Now the building's mailboxes are no longer as great a target for stolen paychecks, and residents can avoid late fees for rent and other bills due to scheduled bill paying. Another benefit is improved resident relations because staff can now focus conversations about what is going on in the building rather than creating tension about unpaid rent.

Access to information and services

In addition to needing access to financial resources, many people struggle to know what types of assistance they may be entitled to. Internet sites, like the National Committee on Aging's online tool www.benefitscheckup.org, help families and senior citizens identify programs and services for which they are eligible.

More and more, the Internet is the place we turn to save time in searching for what we need. For low-income individuals and families, the Internet can increasingly be a time saver when trying to locate affordable housing or childcare. Local efforts include www.clevehomes.com powered by Cleveland Housing Network, and the childcare locator filled with up-to-date information in Portland, Oregon, in partnership with One Economy's Beehive at www.childcareportland.org.

The Internet can be a time saver for low-income families and individuals.

CASE STUDY: San Diego Workforce Partnership, Inc.

www.workforce.org

In an effort to provide some level of services to rural and underserved areas of San Diego County, California, the San Diego Workforce Partnership developed Employment and Training Information kiosks. These kiosks use the latest touch screen technology to provide information and services related to employment, training, and community resources. The information on the kiosk is localized for the community it is intended to serve.

An added benefit of using touch screen technology in service delivery is that it helps to bridge the digital divide. The touch screen allows clients with low levels of computer literacy to overcome this barrier to access and obtain valuable information on local employment and training resources.

Access to learning and education

Whether having access to a better job or enriching oneself through life-long learning, education plays a critical role in self-sufficiency. However, there are often many barriers to accessing education. Technology can play a major role in helping community development organizations overcome learning barriers. Education need not be limited to schools and classrooms, but can be expanded into community centers, libraries and households across the country.

The Internet is a 24-hour source of information, allowing online learning to occur whenever it is convenient for the user. People of all ages are exploring new frontiers of knowledge in an era of global learning, as children in a science class converse real-time with NASA scientists, and pen pals on different sides of the globe exchange ideas through email.

To reach new audiences as well as engage existing participants in the learning process, many nonprofits have implemented computer-based training, otherwise known as e-learning. These initiatives range from providing informational content, like that on One

Computer-based options like e-learning can overcome many barriers to education access.

Economy's Beehive (www.beehive.org) that can be studied anytime, to an interactive online classroom with a "real-time" instructor. To learn more about e-learning and other ways technology can support education services in nonprofits, see NPower's "Technology Guide for Nonprofit Leaders: A Mission Support Tool for Education Services."

Increasing community voice

Without action from groups and individuals, access to information and education alone does not change communities for the better. Increasingly there are tools available online that help people nationwide take action on issues that concern them.

For example, using Scorecard (www.scorecard.org) – a website designed to make education about the local environment as easy as checking the weather – a community member can learn about major pollutants in the community and who is releasing them by simply entering his or her ZIP code. But there's more to Scorecard than learning and awareness. Scorecard provides tools to send free faxes or emails to polluting corporations, voicing concern for the pollutants they are releasing into the area, and it also offers ways to find volunteer opportunities or join discussion groups to get more involved.

Another tool, E The People, (www.e-thepeople.org), is operated by the Democracy Project, a nonprofit organization aimed at creating citizen-centric public spaces on the Internet. When people participate in the civic process by sharing opinions and learning about issues and leaders – and communicating directly with those who make decisions that impact their lives – they foster healthy communities by connecting with other community members and engaging in the issues that affect them.

As a community development organization seeking to empower community members to participate in their democracy, you can add tools to your website by subscribing to robust fee-for-service tools like GetActive or Convio. Groundspring.org offers an entry-level, lower-cost tool called AdvocacyNow. E The People provides free, non-customizable tools, such as discussion forums and petitions, on its website. Depending on your goals and resources, you will want to find the right mix of customization and content control.



Community development organizations empower citizens to participate in the democratic process.

Summing it up

When you think of technology as a community development tool, you can significantly increase your organization’s effectiveness, efficiency, and empowerment. Consider the following scenarios:

Strengthening Organizational Effectiveness	Challenges	Strategies	Possible Tools
	Your organization is about to begin a new project with which it has very little previous experience.	Use searchable electronic databases to locate resources and learn from other CD organizations’ experiences (avoid re-inventing the wheel).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ LISC Online Resource Library: www.liscnet.org/resources■ Enterprise Resource Database: www.enterprisefoundation.org/resources/ERD■ KnowledgePlex: www.knowledgeplex.org
	You’re working with several other community development organizations on one project, but it’s difficult to coordinate tasks, and efforts end up being duplicated.	Use collaboration software to share documents, contacts, and a project calendar. Maintain these shared resources in a centralized location so that nothing is duplicated.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ www.npogroups.org■ Yahoo groups: groups.yahoo.com■ MSN groups: groups.msn.com■ Bravelo: www.bravelo.com■ Groove: www.groove.net
	You need to demonstrate a specific community need or the impact of a specific project.	Use handheld computers and digital cameras to conduct neighborhood surveys, and then visually display the information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Enterprise Foundation’s Neighborhood Survey Pro■ Pendragon handheld survey software■ City Scan: www.city-scan.com■ Local colleges or governments that provide GIS services
	Your funder has increased its reporting requirements.	Use automated client tracking systems and automatically generate reports.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ www.socialsolutionsonline.com■ Ebase software: www.ebase.com■ Microsoft Access

Not everyone has easy access to these types of online resources because many people lack the necessary technology tools and training. To date, digital divide efforts in our country focus on improving community access to technology.

However, if as a society we only focus on access, and neglect to delve into relevant and useful content that people in need will find on the Web, access will cease to matter.

Gaining Organizational Efficiencies	Challenges	Strategies	Possible Tools
	Your staff wastes too much time looking for files and coordinating schedules.	Have everyone in the office electronically share his or her calendars and important documents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Microsoft Outlook ■ www.calendars.net ■ Set up an office file server
	You need to improve your fundraising program.	Use online services to help you raise funds and manage members, donors and volunteers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Groundspring.org ■ Etapestry.com
	You need to improve your accounting program.	Have a full-featured financial package for managing money.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ MIP Accounting Software (www.mip.com)
	You want to improve your organization's ability to manage projects.	Use project management software to increase efficiency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Microsoft Project
	Your organization manages several housing properties, and it's difficult to keep track of their daily operations.	Use property management software to keep up-to-date information on properties, loans, rentals, and maintenance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Rent Roll – www.pmas.com/prod_rentroll.php ■ Tenant Pro – www.tenantpro.com

Empowering People to Help Themselves	Challenges	Strategies	Possible Tools
	Your clients have trouble paying their bills and filing their taxes on time.	Teach your clients how to pay their bills and taxes electronically, and provide a community computer where they can do this. Educate your low-income clients about the Earned Income Tax Credit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ www.icanefile.org
	Your clients don't know what resources are available to them, or what types of assistance they are eligible for.	Use online tools to help your clients find resources and assistance and identify eligibility.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ www.benefitscheckup.org
	Your clients need access to educational resources.	Use online resources to provide your clients with information and virtual learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ www.beehive.org ■ www.developmentgateway.org/e-learning
	Your clients want to make their voices heard on civic and political issues.	Introduce your clients to online advocacy tools and electronic communication tools, such as listserves and forums.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>GetActive</i> ■ <i>Convio</i> ■ <i>AdvocacyNow</i> ■ www.e-thepeople.org ■ www.scorecard.org

Access to technology alone is not going to make a difference in people's lives. Instead, it is the way we use technology and, as a result, the content and tools available, that will have a positive impact on society. The next section will look in depth at the steps a community development organization should consider when grappling with placing compelling Internet tools into the hands of their community.

Technology solution close-up

Finding an affordable apartment, seeing what childcare choices are available, having and using a checking account to build personal assets – these are challenges often faced by low-income individuals and families. It is often true that these same people do not have access to a computer or the Internet. But a trusted community partner like a community development organization can play a key role in offering access and guidance, providing people in need with the tools to accomplish these vital tasks.

The Internet offers an increasing number of places for people to turn to enhance their lives. Community development organizations not only can train individuals how to access and use these resources, they can also influence future development of content for individuals and communities. Working in the community is often about high touch. It's important to state that technology tools build on what is available and rarely can replace the personal approach.

In this section, we will take a closer look at using these tools in service delivery and the key steps to consider for success. To better illustrate the steps outlined, we will use a specific scenario of a community development organization working in a low-income community that is grappling with helping individuals build personal wealth.

STEP 1 *Envision: Articulate a clear vision of whom you want to serve and how.*

When thinking about technology or any new approach, it is important to stay grounded in the mission of the organization. When considering Internet options that might make a difference in the community, have a vision of whom you are trying to serve and the barriers they face.

Community development helps individuals manage and develop personal wealth in order to strengthen the financial vitality of their overall community.

For example, the following vision could help guide a group working with low-income families and individuals.

SAMPLE VISION

Low-income families and individuals receiving our services are struggling to build a personal savings account that would enable them to save for necessities like housing deposits, health emergencies, or education. These community members face monthly challenges to pay bills on time or even have enough money to cover food and other basic expenses. Under these pressures, they often feel they do not have money to set aside in a savings account. Many are eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit when filing federal taxes, but few claim the credit.

Our vision for technology is one where the technology helps low-income individuals and families easily and securely identify, build and manage their financial assets.

STEP 2 Assess: Determine needs and resources

Relevant Internet tools and content for low-income families and individuals are beginning to emerge, and nonprofits are at the heart of making it possible. To find tools and content that might make a difference in the lives of the people you serve, there are two things to consider.

First, look for what already exists. Explore the websites of peer organizations and current funders both locally and nationally and see what they are making available. Another great resource is Content Bank (www.contentbank.org), whose mission is to spur the development of online content and tools produced for and by low-income and other underserved communities. It provides content for those ready to use technology, including staff and program participants at community-based organizations.

Second, look for examples from which you can borrow. The technology behind the Internet often makes it possible for you to easily build on what is already up and running. For example, if the Child Care Locator on the Beehive (www.childcareportland.org) is something that would fill a need in your community, it may be relatively easy to customize for your area. Many online tools can provide customization for a local area while the engine that makes them work is maintained separately.

To find out if a tool can be localized, look for information about the nonprofit or company behind the tool and contact them to see what is possible. One Economy, for example, is the nonprofit organization that built and maintains the national content on the Beehive. It has a range of partnerships and approaches that make it possible for a state, city, or even a housing development to have its own local version.

Syndication is another way to take advantage of what is already built. Using XML or other technology, you may be able to have content available from the source “feed” directly to your website. The nature of the Internet and how tools are built often make it cheaper to customize a version or share content rather than own and maintain a site.

If localization or syndication is not possible, local examples often illustrate approaches that have worked for a community. They offer a good starting place and lessons learned for developing something new.

Below is a table of ideas and examples to explore.

Issues	Examples and Ideas for Internet Tools
Was laid off from a job. What do I do now?	www.beehive.org/jobs/Unemployment-benefits-apply.asp
Need to find childcare but can't pay.	www.childcare.org (local example)
Am searching for low-cost rental housing.	www.housingconnections.org (local example)
Need to find medical care for my son and I don't have insurance.	www.momsandkids.org/momsnkids/default.asp (local example)
Am feeling lots of anxiety but don't know if it is serious.	Take an assessment at www.paniccenter.net/anxietytest
My husband is abusing me and I can't tell anyone – where can I call? How do I get an order of protection?	Demonstration of local example - Online order of protection: www.fcny.org/nydvdemo
A local company may be polluting the air and making my children sick – what can I do?	Check out the local polluters in your neighborhood at www.scorecard.org
Where can I turn to learn about candidates and get involved in the process?	League of Women Voters feeds their local, state and national data into www.dnet.org during national election years and your local league's website during non-national years.
The cost of caring for my elderly parent is getting to be too much. What kind of assistance can we get?	www.benefitscheckup.org

Once you spot a tool you may want to use or customize for your community, it is a good idea to go back to your vision and detail all the reasons why people are not able to connect with the resources or services that you see as critical.

For example, a group trying to help individuals build personal wealth through the sample vision statement outlined above may consider the Internet application I-CAN! EIC™ (www.icanefile.org). I-CAN! EIC™ is free, Internet-based tax software that guides low-income individuals through the process of applying for their earned income tax credit. The application is available in both English and Spanish

What follows is a list of common barriers facing nonprofits and individuals who want to use available Internet tools:

Barriers	How They Affect Access to Federal Earned Income Tax Credit
Awareness	May not know what it is or if they are eligible for the tax credit.
Access to technology	May not have access to a computer or the Internet.
Basic computer skills	If access is available through a community technology center or library, they may not have the computer skills to use the tools effectively.
Cultural relevance	May not be accepted within family or community norms to “ask” for money from the government.
English as a second language	May have difficulty reading forms or asking questions if translation services are not available.
Limited literacy	May have difficulty reading materials made available.
Self-confidence	May lack confidence to ask questions or assert needs.
Time	May be too busy to remember to file, or work odd hours and be unable to access assistance.
Trust	May not feel comfortable sharing personal information with someone providing assistance or federal government.

Once you have assessed what is available and the challenges people face, you can begin to look at how you might introduce the tool into your service delivery. There are two things to consider at this stage. The first is your organization’s capacity to implement a new technology initiative. The second is how to integrate the new technology into your service delivery in a way that best addresses the unique challenges of those you want to serve.

Assessing organizational capacity

Being realistic about what your organization can take on in terms of new programs, approaches and the associated tools, helps ensure success. You will need to assess your organization in terms of technology infrastructure, staff capacity and skills, financial impact and organizational culture.

The demands on your technology infrastructure will depend on whether you are borrowing, building or hosting the Internet tool that helps address community needs. For example, in the case of using www.icanefile.org, at a minimum you would need access to the Internet and a computer with a connection to the Internet. You also may want a printer to print out completed tax forms, Adobe Acrobat Reader to read instructions, and sound capabilities and Windows Media Player to hear and see the video demonstrations.

In contrast, if you were going to host a tool like the Cleveland Housing Network's www.clevehomes.com, you would need a great deal more technology infrastructure, including high-speed Internet access, computer servers and software development programs.

As you uncover the details of the technical requirements for implementing a new tool, keep in mind that the cost of the technology is not just the purchase price for a new computer or software. It is important to consider all the ownership and operating costs, such as staff training, support contracts and maintenance costs.

And finally, consider the culture and work style in your organization. For groups that constantly like to try new things, introducing the idea of a technology tool in service delivery may be exciting or expected. However, if technology is viewed as a burden to staff, or there are concerns that utilizing technology will get in the way of interactions with residents or make working with clients seem impersonal, then it will be critical to adapt the implementation accordingly.

Ways to integrate tools into service delivery

Technology is not going to replace the personalized guidance and assistance that trusted staff can offer. Instead, technology should be viewed as a tool, like a telephone, bulletin board, or "smart form" that takes your responses and provides answers. When looking for appropriate ways to integrate technology tools into service delivery, the range of options include:

- a) **Raise awareness:** Conduct outreach in the community to make people aware of the tool. You know the best ways to reach your community – you might try circulating flyers, adding it to your website, sending postcards, or making other nonprofits you work with aware of the tool.
- b) **Offer access:** Provide computer access to the community you serve. This can be as simple as a single workstation in the lobby with a handout to offer direction.
- c) **Provide coaching:** If you work one-on-one with clients, you might consider walking them through the tool as part of your service delivery process. For example, a young mother taking care of an elderly parent may sit next to you in your office as you both go through the questions on BenefitsCheckUp (www.benefitscheckup.org) to see what services she may be eligible for. Another, more scaleable, approach is to host a community event at a local computer lab or library. You can staff the event with volunteers to help guide community members through use of the tool. You might even consider involving youth as resource in coaching – they are often fearless about technology. When considering this approach, it is important to be sensitive to issues around privacy of information. Also consider designing the learning interaction in a way that provides the individual with hands-on experience using the keyboard and the application.
- d) **Provide training:** Partner with community technology centers to offer workshops on how to use the Internet with the specific tool as the example. Community technology centers are always looking for meaningful ways to introduce the community to technology tools. Imagine the interest that would be generated for a class on "Learn how to use the Internet to file your taxes today" compared to a generic "How to use the Internet" class.

STEP 3 *Prioritize: Find a balance between costs and impacts.*

The key to selecting the best approach for your organization is to balance the service delivery method that makes most sense given the constraints and barriers, with the total cost of implementing.

For example, adding a tool to your website might be the least expensive approach, but will it have the community impact you are looking for? Conversely, designing a curriculum to teach low-income individuals how to take advantage of an online tool may only be cost effective if you are confident that using it will enhance the lives of a large number of individuals.

Partnerships often help balance out the costs and increase the impacts. Look for ways to collaborate with the groups that offer the tools. For example, the Legal Aid Society of Orange County (the group behind www.icanefile.org) has a partnership program where it provides outreach materials, example timelines and checklists, and tips on helping low-income families and individuals take advantage of the Earned Income Tax Credit.

To find a balance for your organization, you will likely want to blend several approaches that best meet the needs of your community and fit your budget and staff capacity.

STEP 4 *Take action!*

While outreach is a familiar task, coaching or training using a technology tool may be new. To be successful, consider doing some research and starting small. Design the approach with your best knowledge of what should work and then set up a small pilot to try out your ideas and learn more. You may even want to do a dress rehearsal before bringing in a community member, because role-playing often helps identify gaps and places that generate confusion.

With technology tools, it's important to clearly spell out the "next step." Whether a person clicks on your website, joins you in your office or comes to an event, having a clear picture of what the next steps are will make a big difference in helping him or her be successful.

When you are ready, recruit a few brave community members who would be willing to try out the tool and offer candid feedback about their experience. Then take what you learn from their feedback and improve the approach. Once you feel like you have practiced an approach that has great promise for your organization as a whole, you can implement the program on a larger scale.

When considering Internet options that might make a difference, have a vision of whom you are trying to serve and the barriers they face.

Conclusion

The community development sector has creatively employed many strategies to spread the wealth in their communities and to engage and empower residents. Technology tools – from online resources for finding childcare to a GIS database that maps local improvements – can offer yet another way to connect with the community.

It's important to remember that technology offers community development organizations more than just increased efficiency. While technology tools can help save time and steps when sharing best practices, collaborating or measuring impact, technology's real promise is how it can empower people and transform possibilities.

To be successful in implementing any new technology, it's important to tie technology choices to your mission, to consider implementing it in small steps to ensure success, and to keep in mind the total cost of ownership.

A trusted community partner like a community development organization can play a key role in offering access and guidance, providing people in need with the technology tools to improve their lives and their neighborhoods.

Technology's real promise is how it can empower people and transform possibilities.

Resources and additional information

The Legal Aid Society of Orange County (LASOC) provides a free web-based application called I-CAN! EIC™, that helps low-wage earners claim the Federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and complete their federal tax forms. The tool is written at a fifth grade literacy level, in English and Spanish, and a video guide reads questions to users. Ninety-eight percent of all users rate it as easy or very easy to use, it is completely free with no hidden charges, and it is certified by the IRS as an online tax provider.

LASOC encourages other community development organizations to promote I-CAN! EIC™ in their own communities. Appendices A and B include sample outreach and partnership materials, all of which are available online at [*www.icanefile.org*](http://www.icanefile.org).

Appendix A – Models for Partnership

Appendix B – Implementation Checklist

APPENDIX A

I-CAN! EIC Models for Partnership

Provided courtesy of the Legal Aid Society of Orange County

OPTIONS	TASKS YOU MIGHT DO
1. Promote the Site to Clients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Display posters in your office. • Distribute brochures to your clients at major outreach events or via mailers or office visits. • PSAs: Send a copy of the radio and video Public Service Announcements to your local public stations. • Sister organizations: Send materials about the project to your sister organizations. • Promote it on your website: Display the www.icanefile.org site on your website. • Network with volunteer tax preparers: Find out who in your community provides free tax preparation and refer clients there.
2. Provide a station for clients to use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make available a personal computer, with access to the Internet and a printer. • Recruit a volunteer or support staff to help the user get to the site and answer technical questions. • Provide regular hours (once a week or day) when users are free to use your system. • Register your system with our office so that we can track how much money you are returning to clients! • Post fliers for your taxpayers, and route them to www.icanefile.org.
3. Integrate it in your delivery system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Record a message: If you have a call-in number with a recording, record a script about the I-CAN! EIC project. • Remind clients about EITC and I-CAN! If you see clients on other matters, advise them on the EITC and how to claim it. • Offer or integrate into a class or clinic. • Train your offices and staff about the EITC and its benefit to your client community.

APPENDIX B

I-CAN! EIC Implementation Checklist

Provided courtesy of the Legal Aid Society of Orange County

Note: 80% of all EITC returns are filed between Jan 15th – Feb 15th.

Ideally, you want to be prepared to open your doors for service mid-January.

Register as a Partner and Sign the Partnership Agreement

Go to: www.icanefile.org/programs and click on Sign Up! to Become a Partner.

Decide Promoting? or Creating a Workstation for Clients?

Determine whether or not you'll be promoting I-CAN! EIC™ or creating workstations for clients to use the Internet. If you are working with a coalition, put together a document that lists who will be doing what and during what hours of operation.

Decide the Points of Access and Other Issues

- Determine the points of access for I-CAN! EIC™ and their hours of operation. For example, if you are creating a work station, you (and/or your coalition) will need to figure out:
 - Where are the points of access going to be? (Names of programs, addresses, and contact people)
 - Who will staff these efforts? (Volunteers? Savvy clients? High school kids? Interns or students? Clerical staff? Legal or technical staff? Librarians?)
 - How will clients access the service? (Walk in anytime, by appointment only, part of a class?)
 - What are the hours of service?
 - What other services are offered at locations and how clients call for info? (Financial literacy, banking services? What number will clients be told to call for list of sites? Is it a voicemail box, a recorded message, integrated with a screening interview?)

Decide your (and/or coalition's) approach to promote the service.

Determine whether you'll use brochures, fliers, TV ads or Public Service Announcements, partnerships, website links, press events, and/or signs as part of your strategy to promote the service.

- For Mailers: Who will receive them and how? (For example: In school stuffers that go home with kids? Utility bill mailers? Postcards or tri-fold brochures to your client database? Stuffers in employer or union mailers? Fliers in your office?)
- For Mailers: Prepare to mail the week after Christmas. (Dec. 26th – Jan 10th is the best time for taxpayers to receive materials on tax assistance and services.)
- Public Service Announcements (PSAs): Contact us if you are interested in using our pre-made PSAs: www.icanefile.org/programs/Resources/PSAs/default.html

Attend a Training

Once you register, you can attend a training. If you are using volunteers or are a part of a larger coalition, you can either invite LASOC to a Train the Trainers session, or we can specifically train your group(s).

January Checklist:

Double check the details:

- Did mailers and promotional go out?
- Are there other ways to distribute (employers, schools, etc.?)

- Did you request the PSAs?
- Is your staff fully aware of the start date and ready to refer folks?

Site Preparation: (before you go live)

- Print and post: Client Checklist: Are You Ready to File Your Taxes?
(Found at www.icanefile.org/programs.)
- TV or Fliers On-Site: You can run the PSAs on a VCR in your lobby for clients to see, or post fliers.
- Banners, posters, or brochures available at places of notice?

Technology Check

- Does the system work and print? Make sure you run the tech test available on www.icanefile.org/programs to test that your system can access the site online, print forms, and operate.
- Reporting USER ID entered? Make sure your tech contact entered the USER ID so we can track reports for you.

January 15th – 20th: Start Date and Open Doors!

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