

The Short Story of Technology Assistance for Nonprofits

Briefing paper prepared for the Funders Forum of Tampa Bay, January 19, 2005, by Doris Reeves-Lipscomb with editing assistance from Ann Larsen and other Task Force members.

A Look at the National Scene

Nonprofit organizations are working across the country to help other nonprofits harness the power of technology to carry out their missions to help people and animals, improve and protect the environment, stimulate the development of arts and culture, encourage citizen involvement, and achieve social justice, among other worthy aims.

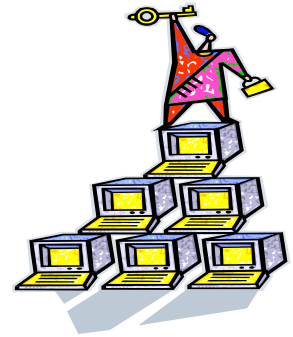
Three examples of highly successful technology assistance nonprofits include:

- **NPower**—Starting in Seattle, a network of twelve independent, locally based nonprofits dedicated to one thing: *Putting technology know-how in the hands of nonprofits*, has been established around the country. NPower's mission is to ensure all nonprofits can use technology to expand the reach and impact of their work. Go to <http://www.npower.org> to learn about how NPower affiliates help other organizations achieve more, more quickly.
- **IT Resource Center**—Simply stated in its own words, the IT Resource Center helps nonprofit organizations use computers. Founded in 1984 in Chicago, the Center provides comprehensive technology planning, training and support services to more than 400 organizations each year. It is the grandmother of all technology assistance nonprofits in the country located at www.itresourcecenter.org/.
- **NetCorps**—NetCorps was founded in 1996 in the Pacific Northwest to increase the capacity of environmental, social justice and community-based organizations to organize, advocate, and address social and environmental issues through the application of appropriate communication and information technology, training and assistance. With offices in Oregon and North Carolina, the NetCorps story can be

found at <http://www.netcorps.org/>.

Their Structure and Funding

The technology assistance 501(c)(3) nonprofits generally adhere to a business model that relies heavily on fee-for-service. The mature technology assistance nonprofits may derive 50% or more of their income from membership and service fees paid by nonprofit groups who are being served. Other sources of funds are grants from foundations and corporations, local fundraising events, and partnerships with funders, such as the United Way, to achieve specific local objectives.



Making computers work for nonprofits

Their Benefit to Nonprofits

Each technology assistance nonprofit has myriad testimonials from nonprofit organizations it has assisted. Each TA nonprofit also tracks its performance in terms of services delivered, number of client groups served, and monetary value it has provided. For instance, TechBridge, the NPower affiliate in Atlanta, reports that it has facilitated the donation of more than \$2,000,000 in free Microsoft software to area nonprofits, and delivered over 9,000 hours of professional technology services and programming to help more than 60 nonprofit clients, in its previous year of operation.

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Research on Technology Needs of Nonprofits in the Tampa Bay Area

“I am selling my children,” said one focus group participant when asked for future fund raising methods.

“I am trying to move the technology expense into the general operating expense budget. We can’t keep living on grants to fund it,” said another focus group member.

Focus Groups and Online Survey

The Juvenile Welfare Board of Pinellas County commissioned a focus group study and online survey of a range of human service organizations serving children and families in the County in 2004. The following technology needs surfaced.

- More IT staff expertise is needed in nonprofits to maintain hardware and software, including networks. Program staff need to be better trained to create “ownership of technology.”
- Remote access to organizations’ intranets and wireless laptops would enable many benefits to organizations and clients but most nonprofits lack this access and do not have the equipment.
- Laptops, desktops, and intranets are top priority upgrades for the surveyed organizations. However, lack of funding and the cost of maintenance are major barriers to achieving the upgrades.
- Training is a large, unmet need. Only three out of ten organizations (completing the survey) had a majority of staff who had received some computer training in the past year. Three out of ten respondents said they don’t have a formal training plan and employees are expected to learn on their own.
- Training priorities are technology security and using computers for analyzing outcomes and program evaluation.
- Data collection and analysis challenges include different sets of reporting requirements for funders, distrust of data collection systems by staff as to their security, and how the data may be used to ensure staff accountability, and the shortage of skilled staff to manipulate the data to run queries and reports.
- Help desired from a technology assistance nonprofit includes assistance with training, collaboration initiatives, network maintenance, and technology assessment and planning.
- Nonprofits believe that many funders treat technology as a short-term or capital expenditure and do not see technology maintenance and staff training as ongoing costs that should be routinely included in program budgets. The result is a reactive-mode on the part of nonprofits to integrate technology planning, purchases and training with program delivery.

The View From Here: A Snapshot of Technology Assistance Needs of Nonprofits in the Tampa Bay Area



Net Impact

Many nonprofit organizations have to work harder, rather than smarter, because they don’t have the basic technology infrastructure. The smaller organizations often lack current and compatible hardware and software; local connectivity; and the ability to use the Internet for easy communication, collaboration, and research. Small and midsize organizations struggle with inadequate information technology staffing, relying on combinations of “accidental techies” (program staff charged with IT responsibilities), pro bono

assistance, and contractors, to provide basic computer and network support. Many midsize and large nonprofits do not have comprehensive information databases that allow them to easily analyze the impact of their programs or track the activities of clients, members, and other constituents or produce reports documenting outcomes for funders. Some must also cope with different reporting requirements imposed by funders.

This excerpt is from a study completed in 2003. Go to www.groups-that-work.com for a copy of the report or its summary.

What's Happening with Technology Assistance for Nonprofits in Tampa Bay

The Tampa Bay Technology Assistance Non-profit Network (TANN) Task Force, working through the Management Assistance Program (MAP) of Tampa Bay, is seeking funds to support the development of a technology assistance program for nonprofits in the Greater Tampa Bay Area. The early mission of the program is to:

share the power of technology with nonprofits to transform community visions into results.

Activity Timeline

October 2004 and beyond—Seek funding to support development of a technology assistance program for nonprofits in the Greater Tampa Bay area.

October 2004—Outreach to key stakeholders; analyzing technology assistance needs info obtained from focus groups and online survey of nonprofits in Pinellas County

August-September 2004—Focus groups

and online survey to look more in-depth at technology assistance needs of nonprofits serving children and families in Pinellas County. Approval given by MAP board to serve as fiscal agent for initial capacity building effort.

July 2004—Key stakeholder session to present recommendations

November 2003-June 2004—Information gathering and analysis, and planning of TANN organization

November 2003—Community building session convened and Technology Assistance Planning Group starts

June 2003-November 2003—Doris Reeves-Lipscomb, Groups-That-Work, completes research study on the technology assistance needs of Tampa Bay area nonprofits in November 2003



"We need a source that understands where we are," urged one focus group participant.

Projected Services

The projected range of TANN services could include:

- Technology planning and assessment for nonprofit organizations to identify short- and long-term needs for technology that support the delivery of their mission and services
- Training on computer technology issues and database software for nonprofit management, program, and administrative staff
- Information and referral to funders, and nonprofit and for-profit technology service providers, for aid in procuring and maintaining appropriate hardware, software, and technology services
- Direct and referral assistance with information management database design, implementation, maintenance, and queries and reports
- One-on-one consulting as organizational expertise accumulates to assist individual nonprofits with local area network installation, cost-effective and high-performance internet access, desktop and software installation, etc.





MAP

1111 N. Westshore Blvd.,
Suite 215
Tampa, FL 33607-4711
TEL (813) 287-8779
FAX (813) 287-8749
<http://www.maptampabay.org/>

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Technology Assistance Nonprofit Network (TANN) Task Force Contact Information

- Alex Furnari, Children's Board of Hillsborough County, 813.229.2884
- Pat Gehant, Juvenile Welfare Board, 727.547.5600
- Brian Haas, Vistalogix, 727.542.0995
- Phillip Hagan, Independent Technology Consultant, 727.725.8374
- Ann Larsen, MAP of Tampa Bay, 813.287.8779
- Ernie Moore, Moore Innovative Solutions & Services, 813.431.2591
- Kaya Parwanicka, Dunedin Fine Art Museum, 727.298.3322, ext. 236
- Doris Reeves-Lipscomb, Groups-That-Work, 727.723.7714
- Frank Riddick, Webworkz, 813.886.0795
- John Roll, Florida Craftsmen, Inc., 727.896.7093
- Howard Rutherford, Pier Aquarium, 727.894.1503
- Ralph Smith, Computer Mentors, 813.236.1191
- Stefanie L. Wertowich, All For You Consulting, 813.313.3905

Future Directions

With MAP serving as its fiscal agent, the TANN Task Force is currently:

- Refining a business plan for the development of a technology assistance program. The plan follows the template provided by NPower Seattle. Its components will include an assessment of the Tampa Bay nonprofit community and its technology needs; availability of existing technology services; service delivery model, fee structure, budget and revenue projections; and an action plan for the next twelve months. Target completion: Spring 2005
- Reaching out to a wide range of nonprofits to have them complete an online survey on their technical capacity and computer usage. The goal is to collect at least 100 completed surveys from a range of local nonprofits. Target completion: Data collection and analysis by Spring 2005
- Researching service delivery structures in use by technology assistance nonprofits around the country. The goal is to learn from other nonprofits and combine their lessons learned with a local asset-building approach in the Tampa Bay area. The blended approach to service delivery will include technology staff specialists, contractors, interns, and volunteers. Target completion: Draft service delivery structure developed by Spring 2005
- Exploring the merits of starting and facilitating a 501 Tech Club for nonprofits in this area. Using email group lists technology offered by N-TEN (National Technology Enterprise Network), we can set up an online means for local nonprofit staff to talk with each other about their technology issues. Depending on the interest, the Club could also include regular, informal face-to-face forums for nonprofit staff members, board members, and others to learn, resolve problems, and collaborate to realize program opportunities. Target completion: Go/No Go decision by February 2005
- Developing a Technology Assessment and Planning workshop to be offered March 3 at the Rollins College Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Management. This phase is preliminary to developing technology assessment and planning services for nonprofits in the Tampa Bay Area. Target completion: Rollout of TANN technology assistance and planning services—July 1, 2005