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NEWS RELEASE

Computer project helped thousands of local families

More than 2,700 Athens County households received free computers, training and Internet access over the last eight years thanks to a partnership between Athens County Job and Family Services and Hocking College.

State budget cuts forced Athens County Job and Family Services to eliminate the program earlier this year.

“We got into this because we had been talking to a lot of low-income parents whose children were having to go to the local libraries and wait in line for a chance to use the computer. They were getting homework assigned to them that required them to use a computer,” said Jack Frech, director of Athens County Job and Family Services. “At the same time, we were involved in a number of discussions about the ‘digital divide’ and were concerned that as most of the rest of the community was becoming more engaged with computers, low-income families were going to be left out.”

The Computer Connections program was created in 2001 to help these families by enabling them to receive refurbished state computers, along with new printers and modems, computer training and one-year of Internet access, all for free. Athens County Job and Family Services provided much of the funding for the program through the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, although it also received \$30,000 in grant funding from the Osteopathic Heritage Foundation. Hocking College Computer Connections also worked with other southern Ohio counties on the program, and helped to facilitate the distribution of nearly 1,200 computers to households in these counties.

“Overall, the program has been, in my opinion, very successful,” said Project Coordinator John Matuszkiewicz of Hocking College Computer Connections. “We provided a resource...for people who would have never been able to afford a computer to get one with Internet access.” Matuszkiewicz was proud that the program included training on how best to use and maintain the computers, as well as support for the families long after the training had been completed.

Tara McGee of Millfield received a computer in 2008.

“The computer itself is awesome. It’s great,” McGee said. “The training was cool that they put you through.” Her three children are too young to need it for much homework yet, but it is

essential that they learn to use the computer and be comfortable with it, McGee added.

“They really enjoy painting on it. My oldest loves to play games on it, things like that,” McGee said. “I use it, not only to continually search for jobs, but to update my resume, send e-mails and do things like that. It’s quickly becoming more of a necessity than recreation.”

Reta Mash, a Nelsonville grandparent raising three grandchildren and one great-grandchild, received a computer from the program in 2001. Her family was also able to receive a computer in 2007, to replace the first computer.

“It’s been pretty helpful,” Mash said. The grandchildren have used the computer for their homework, especially for doing research for different projects, Mash said.

Several Hocking College students were also among the people receiving computers through the program.

“What was really gratifying was seeing them at commencement or in the hallways at Hocking College and they would say the computers were running fine or they would say, ‘Hey, I couldn’t have gotten through school without the computer,’” Matuszkiewicz said.

Dr. Roy Palmer, senior vice president at Hocking College, is very proud of the Computer Connections program.

“I thought the whole thing was just such an outstanding idea from the beginning,” Palmer said. Too many low-income families in Athens County and around the region simply cannot afford a computer, he said.

“The kids go to school and they are at a definite disadvantage,” Palmer said. Giving children computers gives them access to information from around the world, no matter where they live.

“This whole thing wouldn’t have been possible without the students from Hocking College,” Matuszkiewicz added. “They repaired the computers. I couldn’t have done this on my own.” He noted in particular that the computer electronics students taught by Coordinating Instructor Ken Wiseman were extremely helpful over the years and were a key to the program’s success.

Another key to the program was the donation by Gary Dicken and his staff at Property Management Services and University Moving Services at Ohio University of a large supply of monitors, keyboards and mice, Matuszkiewicz said. That donation made it possible for the Computer Connections program to distribute the final 200 computer systems that were given to Athens County families.

“It’s been a fantastic program,” Matuszkiewicz said.

Palmer agreed, saying that the Hocking College students learned a great deal by being involved in the program.

“From our end of it, it was good for our students because they had a chance to practice what they knew on real projects with real clients,” Palmer said. The project also gave the student a chance to learn more about poverty and allowed them to take part in a valuable community service project. Community service work is an important part of Hocking College’s mission.

“I’d credit (Hocking College President) John Light, who from our beginning has always said that Hocking College should be a part of solving community problems. This certainly is a good example of that,” Palmer said.

Athens County Job and Family Services is also dedicated to serving the community, and Frech said this program has been vitally important for Athens County families.

“We’re very grateful to have formed a partnership with Hocking College that enabled us to provide computers, training and Internet access for low-income families, as well as technical computer training for Hocking College students,” Frech said. “The program has been a

tremendous success.”

For more information on the Computer Connections Program, Hocking College or Athens County Job and Family Services, call Judy Sinnott at Hocking College at 753-7008 or Nick Claussen at Athens County Job and Family Services at 797-2523.