

# Pillsbury United Communities Computer Labs Assessment

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## **Executive Summary**

Pillsbury United Communities is a non-profit organization made up of seven community centers serving urban neighborhoods in Minneapolis, MN. Most of these centers have a computer lab which is used by programs within the organization as well as the surrounding communities. The labs are generally under-equipped, under-staffed, and underutilized. Despite these challenges, the computer labs remain a tremendous community resource. People with no other access to technology come to the PUC computer labs to gain new skills, communicate with loved ones, search for jobs, and learn how to improve their lives. With proper planning and attention, as well as renewed commitment to volunteerism, these labs will better serve Pillsbury United Communities' constituents and increase the capacity of the organization as a whole.

## **Introduction**

The general purpose of this report is to give an account of the computer lab facilities at seven affiliate community centers of the Pillsbury United Communities (PUC). Specifically, the report aims to describe what each community center currently offers in the way of technology programming, what technology programs each center would *like* to offer, and what barriers exist to implementing these programs. Outcomes of this study include recommendations for how PUC can offer more technology programming that serves the needs of its constituents, along with observations on what PUC is currently doing to build up the capacity of its computer labs.

## **Method**

The principal data-gathering methods for this study were interviews and site visits. Six of the seven PUC centers currently have a computer lab. Each lab has one person primarily in charge of the lab's operation. As part of this study, five of the six lab managers were interviewed, and site visits made to four of the computer labs. In addition to site visits and interviews, information was also obtained from the Pillsbury United Communities website and two PUC Directors meetings.

## **Subjects**

Pillsbury United Communities (PUC) is a non-profit organization consisting of seven neighborhood centers located in Minneapolis, MN.

For over 100 years, Pillsbury United Communities has been a presence in Minneapolis neighborhoods and is a widely recognized and highly respected provider of human services and hallmark of a neighborhood center. Pillsbury United Communities operates 41 distinctive programs [including the computer labs] ... that benefit the city's low-income residents. Pillsbury United Communities' 200 dedicated and professional staff work hand-in-hand with the people they serve to help them acquire the internal and external resources they need to improve their lives and gain economic strength. ([www.puc-mn.org](http://www.puc-mn.org))

The following PUC centers have computer lab facilities: Brian Coyle Community Center, located in the Cedar-Riverside area; Camden Neighborhood Center, in North Minneapolis; Oak Park Neighborhood Center, in the Near North neighborhood; Pillsbury House, located in the Powderhorn – Central neighborhood of South Minneapolis; Unity House, in the Jordan and Hawthorne neighborhoods of North Minneapolis; and Waite House, in the Phillips neighborhood. The seventh facility, Glenwood/Lyndale Community Center, is in the process of setting up a computer lab. These centers offer a wide variety of services to their surrounding communities. In addition to the computer labs, a sampling of the programs available include: emergency food shelf, tax assistance, ESL and citizenship

classes, legal assistance, after school programs, summer youth programs, clothing closet, and employment assistance. ([www.puc-mn.org](http://www.puc-mn.org))

## **Results**

### **The Computer Labs**

The computer labs at each center share many similarities. Most have been around at least 3 years. The labs each have 4 – 15 computers, the majority of which are older, donated machines. All of the labs have internet access, and most workstations are connected to the network. Most systems include a web browser and Microsoft Office, but some have additional educational software such as Mavis Beacon. The majority of the people charged with running the PUC computer labs do not come from a technical background. Some of these people actually have a different primary job function, such as Youth Coordinator, but they became lab managers by default. PUC does have a small IT staff in charge of maintaining the organization's technology. However, keeping up with the technology demands of seven community centers, along with six computer labs, is a tremendous task for this limited resource. Currently, PUC has four servers located at Camden Neighborhood Center. These servers host all the applications and staff accounts for the organization as well as the computer labs. Remote access to applications is available via the Citrix system. According to one lab director, this setup makes it very cumbersome for people who want to use the computer lab. In her lab, clients must first have a PUC staff member log them on to Windows. Then in order to

access any applications, they must be signed on to Citrix by a PUC staff member. This nuisance, combined with a dire lack of equipment, led this manager to declare the state of her lab as “needing drastic improvement”. Lab directors have differing attitudes in regards to the condition of their labs. Other comments include “functional, but needs improvement” and “functioning well with the limited resources available”. All of the lab managers, with the exception of one, feel the labs are very important to the surrounding community. Evidence of this is in the fact that, when open, the labs are usually full - often with people waiting to use the computers. One lab director mentioned, “The computer lab is the kids’ favorite part of the community center (along with the gym!)”. The one exception is Camden, where the director claims that due to lack of programming and use for the community, they are considering closing down the lab for the summer. Regardless of the situation at Camden, the general feeling about the PUC computer labs is that they are under-equipped and underutilized, but desperately needed by the community.

### **Programs offered**

Though admittedly underutilized, the labs are used for a variety of programs.

Examples include:

- Technology classes for adults (Computer Basics, Internet, MS Office)

- Teen open lab hours
- Youth homework/game time
- ESL classes
- Tax return assistance
- Job placement assistance
- Somalian computer classes
- Open lab hours

Most youth offerings focus on homework help, games, and internet surfing. Other youth programs also use the computer lab as an incentive for kids to get their work done. Adult programs primarily consist of basic technology classes, job placement, and open lab time.

### **Programs desired**

PUC staff and lab managers have many ideas and wishes for how the computer labs could be used. Desired programs include:

- Website design and construction
- Graphics applications
- Multimedia classes and workshops
- Business center for the community (fax, printer, copier)
- Seniors classes (Basics, Internet/Email, Purchasing a Computer)

- Citizenship classes for new immigrants
- Early childhood programs
- Self-guided tutorials (technical and academic subjects)
- Increased open lab hours

Some staff members mentioned that most programs at their center could use the computer lab in one way or another to supplement their activities.

### **Main obstacles**

Lab managers identified two large barriers to implementing more programs in their computer labs. First, the labs need newer equipment, and they need more of it. One lab manager explained that the computers often need quite a bit of maintenance, and he's forced to spend too much of his time fixing them. Most labs can only offer limited programming because they don't have enough workstations, and the computers they do have are slow and lacking memory. Second, the labs need more personnel. The current lack of staff severely limits the number of open lab hours and technology programs PUC can offer. Lab managers agree that both of these barriers really come down to funding. Staff members in one center pointed out additional challenges. They claim their lab has poor layout, is not adult-friendly, needs its own server, and is prone to acts of vandalism and theft. Staff members also expressed the desire for more guidance from PUC IT staff in regards to maintenance and technology planning standards.

## Discussion

Despite the various challenges faced by the PUC computer labs, there are many positive things going on. Every lab manager spoke with excitement about a new youth program scheduled to begin this fall. "Kid's College" is a reading instruction program that includes a software component. Each PUC computer lab must be upgraded by September in order to handle this new program. According to one center director, there is a group of directors and other staff connected with the computer labs who have been meeting to plan for the Kid's College program and get the labs up to speed. This kind of technology planning is critical to addressing the poor condition of some of the labs and the continued success of others. Apparently there has also been talk of putting Thin Client machines in the labs, with each lab having its own server. Such a move would give the labs greater flexibility while still allowing for high security and control by lab administrators.

While anticipating equipment upgrades, PUC staff can certainly take other steps to address the needs of their computer labs. In these times of budget cuts and layoffs, hiring new staff to work in the labs probably is not feasible. In order to bring staffing levels up to where centers can offer more open lab hours and a greater variety of programs, PUC must rely on technically-skilled volunteers. Volunteer coordinators at each center should recruit more people to work in the labs, making use of services such as the C-CAN Volunteer Hub ([www.c-can.org/volunteers.html](http://www.c-can.org/volunteers.html)) to find these people. Before they begin though, PUC lab managers must have a plan in place for how they will utilize and supervise their technology volunteers. It is

not enough to simply find someone who agrees to volunteer their time. Lab directors must have procedures in place to effectively manage their volunteers. Stability is often an issue when it comes to relying on volunteers to run programs. Centers would definitely find it worthwhile to insist that volunteers commit to working regular hours in the lab for at least three months.

In addition to strengthening staff numbers through volunteers, PUC should seek improvements to the labs which require little or no money. For example, improving the layout of the lab could be as simple as rearranging desks. Making the lab more adult-friendly might consist of implementing new policies and adding adult-only lab hours. Meeting with PUC IT staff might be a start to formalizing the standards for lab maintenance and technology planning. By taking these relatively cost-free measures, staff and clients could see welcome enhancements to the computer labs.

Overall, the outlook for the Pillsbury United Communities' computer labs looks good. PUC shows strong leadership from its directors, and especially with the implementation of the new Kids College program, the computer labs are becoming a priority. Oftentimes, technology drives programming, but in this case, programming is driving the technology. Whatever it takes, the fact that there is a group in the organization dedicated to planning for the computer labs is a very good sign for the future. PUC now needs to find the people-power to use these labs for effective programming. With these pieces in place, the PUC computer labs will have tremendous capacity to provide a vital resource for their communities.

## Appendix

### PUC Computer Lab Interview Questions

1. What is your role with the computer lab(s) here at [center]?
2. Do you come from a technology background?
3. How long has [center] had this computer lab?
4. What programs are offered in your computer lab(s)?
  - a. Technology
  - b. Education
  - c. Other
5. Is this computer lab valuable to [center]'s clients? Is it valuable to the community? What evidence is there of its value?
6. In your opinion, is the lab functioning well, or do you see need for improvement?
7. What programs would you like to see offered in your computer lab(s)?
8. What do you see as the obstacles to implementing these programs?
9. What are the top 3 improvements you'd like to see made at this computer lab? (new/upgraded computers, more staff devoted to computer lab, curriculum development, bigger budget, bi-lingual programming, etc.)
10. Does this lab have volunteer needs? How could this lab use volunteers?

## References

Pillsbury United Communities web site: [www.puc-mn.org](http://www.puc-mn.org)