

Broadband Access Project: Sabathani Community Center

Written by Ivan B. Phifer, MMMC Technology Reporter
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The Sabathani Community Center serves South Minneapolis youth, children and families with programs intended to strengthen and build the capacity in the community.

Sabathani's Broadband Access Project Public Computer Center addresses the issue of the digital divide, inviting at-risk youth and community members that have limited access to internet technology to explore and use high-speed internet training and services.

Sabathani, 310 East 38th Street, Minneapolis, is one of the 11 partner sites in the University of Minnesota's innovative Broadband Access Project (BAP).

The Broadband Access Project is a \$3.6 million initiative of the University's Urban Research and Outreach/Engagement Center (UROC) designed to improve high-speed internet access, awareness and use in four federally-designated poverty zones in Minneapolis and St. Paul. The initiative is part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Broadband Technology Opportunities Program, at the US Department of Commerce.

The Broadband Access Project supports development and enhancement of the 11 community-based public computer centers for underserved populations, including African and African Americans, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander immigrants, and American Indians.

As a result of the BAP grant, Sabathani upgraded its computer lab and employed additional technology support.

Sabathani's original computer lab was funded by Larry Fitzgerald, Jr, himself a graduate of Sabathani's Horizon Youth Program, a program serving community youth for over 24 years. BAP funding meant an upgrade and makeover, including new computers, computer desks and chairs. Computers being retired by the newly-purchased equipment were given to children in the program who do not have computers at home.

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At the upgraded lab, adult participants receive help with resume building.

The computer lab also provides assistance with business plans, where to find information on starting a small business, including business procedures, and financial systems.

There is also a computer training program for senior citizens.

Classes accommodate 20 people each. On completion of a class, individuals receive certificates.

The BAP Computer Lab programs officially started in August. Bobby Lay, who manages Sabathani's Horizon Youth Program, one of Sabathani's original programs, met with parents of Horizon students to let them know about new and improved computer lab. He introduced parents to BAP staff.

Lay said, "The kids are the future, but we have to prepare them to lead. If we do not prepare them, we don't get the type of leadership we need to get a Barack Obama, or somebody better that may be a person of color."

Horizon is also committed to working with adults who are not computer savvy. In the summer, the morning times are scheduled for children, while the evenings and weekends are reserved for adults.

During the school year, Horizon provides after-school academic help for ages K through junior high, with equal girl-to-boy ratio. The program emphasis is on educational support through a core curriculum in reading, writing, math, and computer skills. Further support is provided for social skills development, mentoring and positive role modeling.

Horizon operates through the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) for at-risk kids. They offer fall, winter, spring and summer sessions and operate during school-release periods. Beyond the academics, enrichment activities like video games, basketball, and bowling—anything to keep the energy going—are provided. They also take bi-weekly field trips. Horizon typically enrolls 150 students and many of the students return after their first year. Most students stay throughout high school and often end up putting their own children in the program.

Most children get referred through Minneapolis Public Schools, community service projects, or Hennepin County. Usually parents register their children. This enables the Sabathani Community Center to establish a parent-community relationship. This is important, as Lay stresses, since the program success depends on "The Triangle" - the combination of community, school, and parents' participation. He points out that during the summer, when school is out, and parents are working, the program assumes additional significance. It gives the children a safe space for constructive activities.

Over the years the community around Sabathani has changed demographically. The numbers of Hispanics and Somali and other East Africans have been increasing. Sabathani services have always been available to any inner city resident, irrespective of ethnicity. The multicultural

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focus of the Broadband Awareness Project is another reflection of Sabathani's efforts to serve all in the community and specially to engage children to prepare for the future.

Sabathani's Business Partner Program matches Horizon youth with General Mills employees. Students get information on the world of work and learn about job responsibilities in the workplace. General Mills volunteers also visit with the students at Sabathani. At the end of the summer, mentors and students have an off-ground field trip for further exploration of employment opportunities.

Sabathani's Broadband Access lab is open to the public Monday – Friday, 10:30 AM – 2:00 P.M., and 5:00 P.M. - 7:00 PM.

For further information call Sabathani at 612-827-5981 .