Opening a Center

Opening a Neighborhood Networks center requires thorough and thoughtful planning that begins long before the first resident walks through the door. This planning process begins with an assessment of the key factors—residents needs, funding, staffing, space and equipment needs, estimated startup time, and technical assistance—that enable a center to be established, and more importantly, sustained.

What Funding Is Needed?

Perhaps the most important issue to consider when opening a Neighborhood Networks center is funding. Funding considerations should include startup costs, followed by operational costs that will enable the center to expand and sustain programs and services. Funding issues to consider include:

- What are the estimated startup costs? What funds are available to help the center open?

- What funds are needed to offer and sustain the programs and services that residents need and want?

A variety of funding options are available:

- On a case-by-case basis, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) can consider approving the use of funds from a property's Residual Receipts Account, the Reserve for Replacement Account, excess income, and owner's equity, as well as rent increases and adjustments.

- Private and corporate contributions, such as support obtained from individual donors, corporations, and community foundations.

- Business development, such as outsourcing, small business support, self-employment, and entrepreneurship.

- Fundraising events, such as bake sales, raffles, auctions, and co-sponsoring or participating in events hosted by other organizations.

- In-kind contributions, such as computer equipment, software packages, space, volunteers, instructors, clerical support, and accounting services.

What Staff Are Needed?

Resourceful, friendly, helpful, and reliable staff make residents feel comfortable and encouraged while using a center. When determining staffing needs, consider:

- What tasks will staff members be required to perform? Will staff members be needed for:

  - Management duties (program development, management, and assessment; fiscal accountability; and liaison with governing/advisory bodies and funders)?

  - Community outreach and development (community and public relations, creating publications and announcements, and writing and following up on grant proposals)?

  - Programs and services (teaching/supervising classes and coordinating transportation and childcare services)?

  - Facilities and equipment maintenance (security, housekeeping, and technical support)?

  - Administrative/clerical and support (welcoming visitors, monitoring sign-in/sign-out procedures and public access to computers, providing information about classes, coordinating mailings, updating bulletin boards and information packets, and general office support)?

- How many paid staff members will be needed and what are the estimated salaries for these positions?

- Will volunteers be used to staff the center? If so, how many will be needed? What agencies, schools, or community organizations can be approached to recruit volunteers?

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What Space and Equipment Are Needed?

A successful center is one where people want to visit, stay, and return. To create such a center, consider:

- How many residents does the center expect to serve at once, including peak use periods?

- How much space is needed to house the computers? (As a general rule, each computer should have approximately 20 square feet.)

- Does the proposed center space need construction or retrofitting to be operational? Will the center be located in community space or an offline unit? What is needed to make the space work and how will that happen? What is the projected opening date? Is the operational timetable realistic?

- What type of security will the center need? Is there a security plan for the center?

Once center space has been identified, the next step is to determine what equipment is needed. Consider:

- How many computers will be needed for startup? Will equipment be purchased, leased, or received as a donation?

- What software programs will be needed to support center programs? Who will select the software? How will the software programs be obtained? Software programs may include word processing and desktop publishing, spreadsheets, databases, graphics, and communications software.

When Will the Center Open?

The time required to open a center depends on many variables, such as funds, staff, and space. If these variables are already in place, a center can be established in a relatively short length of time. However, if it is necessary to secure these items, the timeframe is longer.

Work Smart, Use START

Guidance on all of the above-mentioned issues can be found in the Strategic Tracking and Reporting Tool

(START). A business-planning tool, START helps centers with:

- Developing their mission, vision, and objectives; determining benefits to stakeholders; identifying community resources; and gathering demographics and other information.

- Budgeting and fundraising, including financial worksheets, center funding, a sources-of-funding worksheet, and fundraising goals.

- Planning for center operations, including planning for space requirements and equipment and accessibility, as well as developing a center operations timeline.

- Organization and management, including developing a management timeline, organizational goals, and governance.

- Program planning, including evaluating the results of resident surveys; developing annual program goals, objectives, and activities; projecting potential outcomes; and creating a program calendar.

- Marketing and outreach, including creating internal and external marketing plans and recording partnership information and funding commitments.

START also allows centers to generate an annual assessment report that compares goals and objectives to actual results.

Who Can You Call for Help?

Neighborhood Networks recommends that the planning process begin with a call to the local HUD Project Manager or HUD Neighborhood Networks Coordinator. A list of HUD Neighborhood Networks Coordinators can be found at *www.NeighborhoodNetworks.org*. Assistance can also be obtained by calling the Neighborhood Networks Information Center toll-free at (888) 312–2743. The hearing impaired may access the number via TTY by calling the Federal Information Relay Service at (800) 877–8339.

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