
Local foundation helps Mid-Columbians cruise the information highway

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A local organization is helping individuals and organizations get into the information age while promoting the community's quality of life. The RECA Foundation's mission is to disseminate information in support of community development, according to executive director Bruce McComb. The organization coordinates community programs that improve computer access.

"We are especially focused on those who need help getting onto the information superhighway, such as low-income folks, the disabled, immigrants and anyone who is new to the computer revolution," McComb said.

RECA stands for Realizing Every Community Asset. The nonprofit organization began in 1992 as a way to combat inequities in computer access. In February, RECA representatives were honored by Vice President Gore, members of Congress and business executives in Washington, D.C. RECA was selected as one of ten organizations in the United States that had established exemplary telecommunications links in communities.

One of the best known of RECA's services is the Internet site known as Columbia Free-Net (www.tcfm.org) or TCFN. This comprehensive site contains extensive listings of community resources and services, from employment and economic development to health and housing. The site is linked to several dozen nonprofit, commercial, civic and government sites locally, regionally and nationally.

According to McComb, TCFN is the broadest Mid-Columbia site available and also one of the most frequently revised. The site is kept current by an extensive network of volunteers, including local teenagers funded through the Private Industry Council and the Tri-City Volunteer Center. TCFN provides free web space for nonprofit organizations and expertise to help them build and maintain their web sites.

The TCFN Internet site is gaining a reputation as a recruiting tool. In 1996, Cynthia and Stephen Ewer were looking for a community in which Stephen, a cardiologist, could set up his practice. As Cynthia explained, "It's difficult to obtain quality-of-life information from medical recruiters; candidates have a hard time separating the truth from the civic booster hype. In investigating the Tri-Cities, the Tri-Cities Free-Net was by far the most helpful source of independent information that we found." Ewer's husband Stephen is now with Inland Cardiology, and Cynthia Ewer writes about the travels of Perry Bear Ewer for the Tri-City Herald's "Little Herald."

Many Mid-Colombians have benefited from RECA's computer recycling program, which loans donated computers and software. Local human services agencies recommend individuals or organizations to receive the computers. Businesses and individuals donate computers, usually made available through upgrades.

As a nonprofit organization in Washington state, RECA is eligible for free, current software from Microsoft Corporation. "We recently received \$150,000 of up-to-date software from Microsoft and two truckloads of computer components and printers from SAIC," McComb said.

RECA provides free Internet e-mail accounts to individuals and small businesses. Six Community Technology Centers in Kennewick and Pasco provide Internet access and training. According to McComb, these centers have helped people acquire marketable skills and even led to some new home-based businesses.

People with disabilities have also benefited from RECA's services. RECA has worked with the Kennewick-based Edith Bishell Center for the Blind and the Richland Lions Club to provide voice-activated computer systems. The systems enables visually or mobility-impaired people to communicate using computer technology. "At least two Tri-Citians are using these systems to make a living through writing," McComb said.

RECA's community development services go beyond computers. RECA facilitates and schedules the meetings for Crew 52, an informal business networking group. The group meets every Friday from 8-9 a.m. at various locations. The meetings give small business owners, startups and entrepreneurs the opportunity to let others know what they do and learn from each other.

McComb is seeking community assistance to build the Erickson Abilities Center (www.tcfn.org/abilities/eac.html). RECA also needs donated space to expand the computer recycling program. For more information about RECA, contact Bruce McComb at 543-2910 or bmccomb@tcfn.org, or visit the Web site at www.tcfn.org.