



community technology centers' network

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

September 9, 2005

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**Community Technology Reconnects Katrina Evacuees to Hope and Opportunity**

The greatest concern for first responders in times of disaster and crises is the immediate safety, health, shelter, and sustenance needs of survivors. Information and communications technology are, therefore, critical. In the immediate wake of Katrina, however, technology support to those in need was itself overlooked. Thanks to community technology centers (CTCs), thousands are now registering themselves in online missing and found directories, signing up for government assistance, and staying abreast of news and developments to counter rumors and quell fears about what lies ahead.

Two local Houston-area nonprofit community technology networks-- Technology for All and Houston IT Empowerment Consortium-- have coordinated large-scale efforts in the Astrodome and George R. Brown Convention Center respectively to help reconnect survivors to family and loved ones, friends, neighbors, colleagues as well as local and federal agency services. These public-private-nonprofit sector partnerships will be in place for however long they are needed to provide a vital starting point of access to enable evacuees to begin the process of rebuilding their lives. Planning efforts to support similar mid- and long-term efforts are underway in other states.

Community technology centers offer opportunities for government, businesses, and neighborhoods to build strong futures while rebuilding and repairing lives. CTCs operate with a minimum level of visibility, fanfare, or monetary support, yet have worked for over 20 years to ensure that everyone can realize the benefits of technology in a society in which technology literacy and skills are necessary for lifelong learning, jobs, health, community and economic development, and neighborhood needs.

The federal government has estimated nearly 30,000 community technology centers located across America in urban and rural areas, based in or partnering with community- and faith-based learning centers, afterschool centers, libraries and museums, community colleges, 4-H's, Urban Leagues, YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, and housing-based Neighborhood Networks. CTCNet, the Community Technology Centers' Network is the national technical assistance network for over 1,000 of these centers.

Some may dismiss Internet access in times of crisis as a frivolous luxury. A cursory glance at the helplessness and despair that gripped our nation when traditional lines of communication went down, however, should shame anyone offering a Hobson's choice between basic human needs and ensuring that one is not lost or forgotten in a disaster. Moreover, access to much-needed online government assistance services and information to help rebuild lives requires both access to technology and literacy around its use. Many of the displaced lacked this very access and knowledge before Katrina hit, and would face severe barriers to such resources without community technology support on the ground and currently in place.

The challenges of recovery, revitalization, and renewal ahead require an attention to ensuring that people maintain critical information connections to their communities and loved ones, and ways to reach the resources and hope our society is desperately willing to offer. Community technology will not solve all the challenges Katrina has wrought, but it does offer people and families the means to reclaim a sense of control and stability in their lives now, and communities with tools to ensuring that we all stay connected in uncertain times ahead.

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