



STAFF

By: [Ryan J. Stanton](#)  
AnnArbor.com Staff

## Washtenaw County program bridging 'digital divide' by giving computers to low-income homes

Topics: [Business Review](#), [Government](#), [News](#), [Ypsilanti](#)

Posted: Apr 7, 2011 at 5:59 AM [Today]

Two and a half years since its launch, a **Washtenaw County** program that aims to "bridge the digital divide" by providing computers to low-income households is reporting success.

More than 200 discarded computers have been refurbished and put into the hands of residents in need, and a handful even have been donated to nonprofit agencies, said **Jack Bidlack**, director of [The Business Side of Youth](#), a program at **Eastern Michigan University** that aims to improve academic success among area youths through an entrepreneurship curriculum.

Bidlack was joined by **Derrick Jackson**, director of community engagement for the Sheriff's Office, in making a presentation Wednesday night to the [Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners](#). During a [20-minute report](#), they highlighted the successes of the [Digital Inclusion Program](#), which started in October 2008.



Jack Bidlack is director of The Business Side of Youth, which runs the Digital Inclusion Program.

Angela J. Cesere | AnnArbor.com

Jackson was a member of the Digital Inclusion Task Force when it started working on the project four years ago as part of the [Wireless Washtenaw](#) initiative.

Based on statewide surveys and other local data, the task force estimated in 2008 that between 8,000 and 10,000 households in the county did not have a computer mainly for financial reasons. That was out of roughly 138,000 households in the county.

"So it wasn't they didn't know how to use it," Jackson said, adding it also wasn't that residents were intimidated by technology. "They simply could not afford it."

The task force decided to partner with [The B. Side](#), which launched in 2007 with the support of foundation grants, to coordinate workshops designed to train youth in computer repair and to refurbish old computers formerly used by county employees.

"We go out, get the computers, refurbish them, and we get them out to those who cannot afford the technology under any other circumstance," Jackson said.

The program has operated with the aid of a \$16,200 grant from [Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation](#). Jackson said there's no intention of asking the county for money. In fact, he said, it's hoped that the program will continue to be self-sustainable.

Bidlack said not only is the program helping those who are at a technological disadvantage, it's giving local youths ages 14 to 24 jobs and technical training in the process. Since the program launched, 14 youth have been employed, he said.

"They were all paid to receive this training," he said. "One of the youth was actually so proficient I had him stick around for a full year. As an individual who is young, and it's difficult to find jobs in this economy, that young man made about \$2,000 over the course of that year. And I can guarantee that we impacted his life. We also left him with a great skill."

Another six special needs students at Ypsilanti High School went through the training but were not paid, he said. The program also hired four EMU students to serve as site coordinators. Washtenaw County [Employment Training and Community Services](#), a department of the county, provides low-income households with vouchers that allow residents to pick up refurbished computers from the Digital Inclusion storage space at EMU.

The first 200-plus computers came from the county, More recently, the program has worked out a deal to also start taking old computers from EMU.

Bidlack said the program has taken off since last August, when he and his co-director attended Community Day, an annual event hosted by [ETCS](#) to connect area residents with the many human services available in the county. He said they put one of the refurbished computers on a table with a sign that read: "Ask me how you can get this computer free."

"I might have had a handful of people, and that was it. And I explained to them the program, who they had to contact," Bidlack said. "Within two weeks, we had well over 50 people and the numbers were continuing to grow and the phones were ringing off the hook."

Bidlack said he can happily say that over the next four months the program distributed 125 computers, which was more than it achieved in the previous 18 months.

Since its launch, Bidlack said, the program has provided area youth with more than 1,200 paid training hours, including in the areas of hardware cleaning and assembly, software installation, troubleshooting issues and customer service skills. By the end of April, the program will expand to also become a job training program for [Michigan Works](#).

"We'll be taking some of the youth that are in their new programs and bringing them onsite and having them go through the Digital Inclusion Program," Bidlack said. "The cool part about this is we're running about an 8- to 10-week cycle, so we'll be able to impact even more youth." Bidlack said it's also possible the program could expand into a complete electronics recycling program. And if enough computers are coming in, a retail storefront operation might be launched in the future to sell computers at a deep discount to citizens on a walk-in basis.

Bidlack said the program is looking for continued partnership with Washtenaw County and EMU, but it's not asking for financial support.

"We think we've created a sustainable model and we're not looking to come back to you in any form to ask for money," he told commissioners.

"It's just so nice to hear good stories like this," said Commissioner **Kristin Judge**, D-Pittsfield Township. "I can just see that you're impacting our youth in a positive way."

Commissioner **Yousef Rabhi**, D-Ann Arbor, noted the program is not recycling computers, but reusing them, which is even more important, environmentally speaking.

"You're fulfilling one of the basic functions that needs to be fulfilled in our community, which is reusing hardware that is toxic in landfills," he said. "And not only that, but you're giving it to folks that need it to get jobs, and you're giving youth the opportunity to start making something."

Added Rabhi: "The computers might be made in China, but they're refurbished here in Washtenaw County, and that's something that I'm really proud of."

Commissioner **Barbara Bergman**, D-Ann Arbor, said she was thrilled to hear the program is helping youth in the Ypsilanti area, but she wondered if it would expand toward Ann Arbor.

Bidlack said there are no plans for expansion outside of Ypsilanti, but he's not opposed to the idea. He noted the program has seen strong demand, and for now there's a limited number of computers to go around, so they'll go to residents in the greatest need.

*Ryan J. Stanton covers government and politics for AnnArbor.com. Reach him at [ryanstanton@annarbor.com](mailto:ryanstanton@annarbor.com) or 734-623-2529. You also can [follow him on Twitter](#) or [subscribe to AnnArbor.com's e-mail newsletters](#).*