

According to 2008 Washtenaw County government estimates, 8,000 to 10,000 county residents don't have a computer because they can't afford one. That affects their ability to find out about jobs, contact people and obtain information.

The phenomenon is known as the digital divide, and it creates a built-in disadvantage for those who can least afford it.

But one group at Eastern Michigan is working with the county to bridge the divide — and giving local high school students jobs and technical training in the process.

The B. Side of Youth's Digital Inclusion program trains teens to clean and troubleshoot computers, before giving them minimum-wage jobs preparing "retired" computers from the Washtenaw County system under the supervision of EMU graduate student Victor Tran.

Washtenaw County Employment Training and Community Services (ETCS) provides low-income households with vouchers, which allow residents to pick up refurbished computers from the Digital Inclusion storage room in Rackham Hall.

"It's really interesting," said Jack Bidlack, program director for The B.Side. "I think there's a lot of things we take for granted ... There is definitely a segment of the population that does not have access to a computer on a regular basis. People complain that the free computers are only for low-income (recipients). Well, yeah."

Digital Inclusion is an enterprise of The B.Side, a program run by EMU's Academic Service Learning office, which teaches entrepreneurship along with project-specific skills to youth ages 13-20. Digital Inclusion started in 2008 and has distributed more than 200 computers in two years.

"When I showed up, I was going to do it because I needed money. And then I started learning stuff I didn't know about, and it was kind of fun," said Bryan Roberts, a 14-year-old Ypsilanti High School student who's been working with the Digital Inclusion program for almost a year. "I came in knowing nothing about computers except for how to turn them on. I learned how to troubleshoot and fix it if there's a problem. I learned about the components inside. My favorite part is reconstructing them because I've always liked building things and putting things together."

With grant support from local, state and national foundations, The B. Side serves motivated young people who have a drive to learn about entrepreneurship. The core B.Side class — a free, 10-week experience called B.Side Basics — focuses on students developing a business plan and finding micro-



COMPUTER COLLECTION: Stacks of refurbished computers are stored in a room in Rackham Hall. Through Digital Inclusion, a B.Side of Youth program, high school-age students are trained to clean and troubleshoot old computers. The students then prepare the retired computers, obtained through Washtenaw County. Washtenaw County Employment Training and Community Services provides low-income households with vouchers, which allows residents to pick up refurbished computers through the Digital Inclusion program.

loans or sources of funding. The B.Side also connects youth with business mentors and paid internships, and keeps B.Side Basics graduates connected through the Young Moguls Club. This fall, Digital Inclusion brought in another group of technical trainees as the program continued to grow.

Until just a few months ago, Digital Inclusion's distribution numbers were hanging around 70 computers. However, that changed after Bidlack and program assistant Angelina Hamilton Broderick set up a booth at Washtenaw Community Day, an Aug. 14 event at the Key Bank building. Within a week, they were swamped with vouchers as word of mouth about free computers spread throughout the community.

The program gave away 110 computers in two weeks and had to create a waiting list because it was running out of mouse controls and keyboards. The rush reinforced the need for an expanded student staff to handle orders and pick-ups as the program grew. Bidlack said the Digital Inclusion crew would eventually like to put wireless access cards in the free computers so recipients could take advantage of the free wireless network established in Ypsilanti by businessman Steve Pierce.

Through a block grant, Washtenaw County's ETCS pays The B.Side \$75-\$80 for each computer that's sent out. When the program exhausts its current batch of available computers, it will have distributed 212 in a little more than two years. That represents about \$15,000 in profit — enough cash to keep the B.Side program going for at least another year.

Bidlack also has been working with Ypsilanti High School to establish a branch of the program that would train and employ special-needs students. He's currently looking for an instructor — most likely an EMU graduate student or upper-level undergraduate student — with the technical savvy to tear down, rebuild and troubleshoot computers, and the personality to teach those skills to students with different learning styles.

And he's been looking into other potential sources for computers, including EMU.

"Our big goal would be get our hands on all of the cycled-out computers that Eastern handles and be able to provide them — at least for Eastern Michigan students — at a very deep discount," Bidlack said. "We'd love to be able to take that on and be able to incorporate more students to work with high school students and be able to provide that service back to campus."

For more information about the Digital Inclusion program, contact Bidlack at 487-6570 or e-mail him at jbidlac1@emich.edu.