



HARNESSING TECHNOLOGY & CHANGING LIVES



The Stride Center Final Report for the California Emerging Technology Fund May 2016

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Name of Project: Launching Communities Across California
Grant Number: 8256985
Start Date: August 2013 **End Date:** March 2016

I. Financial Summary

- Total Project Budget Spent: \$1,102,532
- CETF Grant Amount: \$225,000
- Additional Grant: (if applicable) \$10,000
- Percentage of Match Funds Raised against Goal (\$877,536) 80%
- Cost Per Assisted Adoption: (Total Outcome/Total Budget) \$330

II. Project Description, Goals and Objectives, and Outcomes

Project Description

The Launching Communities Across California project was designed to train and manage a skilled team of broadband agents to aid in adoption for clients reached through CETF grantee partner outreach. Broadband Agents were from low-income communities, representative of the clients served. The Stride Center provided vendor agnostic, consultative services designed to assist potential new broadband adopters by advising callers about benefits of accessing broadband at home, educating them about access options and pricing for training, low cost equipment, tech support and affordable broadband options, assisting callers with enrollments, and documenting and reporting adoptions for participating CETF grantee partner organizations. In addition to processing incoming calls, texts, tweets, emails and chats, broadband agents were also contracted to perform outreach to partner clients.

Goals and Objectives Summary

- A. Provide a set of tools, practices and competencies that will more effectively assist callers to access broadband from home.
- B. Ensure that client's callers have information about and access to all of the best quality, lowest cost alternatives to the products and services they need to effectively make us of that technology.
- C. Provide a personalized level of service to guide and assist clients to access these services and successfully enter the digital age.

Project Outcomes Summary

Outcome Description	Actual	Goal	Percent Completed
Participants Receiving Certifications	29	27	107%
ICT and Call Center Job Training Graduates	29	27	107%
Training Participant Job Placements	27	12	225%
Broadband Adoption Call Center Knowledge Base Summary Report	10	10	100%
Broadband Adoption Outcomes:			
Eden Housing	100	600	17%
East Bay Regional Broadband Consortium	0	450	0%
OTX	1,315	1,500	88%
Chicana Latina Foundation	921	0	
Stride and Partner Orgs	1,010	0	
Sub Total First Time Adoptions	3,346	2,550	135%
Reconnects and Other	530	0	

IV. Accomplishments and Challenges

Summary of Accomplishments and Impacts of Project

Assessment of Outcomes Achieved in Comparison to Grant Agreement

- The projected outcomes for this grant were either achieved or exceeded. The initial goal of 2,550 adoptions through partner engagement shifted during the grant period when several grantee partners (Eden Housing, and Think Together) made the decision to pursue their adoption goals through different approaches, and new partners (CLF) came onboard. Ultimately The Stride Center significantly exceeded expectations and surpassed the initial grant goal with 3,346 adoptions plus an additional 530 adoptions for people who had recently (within 6 months) had broadband at home or were transitioning from a more expensive broadband provider. Similarly, the training, certification and jobs creation elements of this grant were either exceeded or met. The experience The Stride Center graduates gained through the Contact Center was important. They are now able to add critical work experience to their resumes including help desk, customer service, multi-tasking, Salesforce, 3CLogic (ACD system) and sales.
- In addition to achieving projected outcomes, Stride facilitated the delivery of 189 computers to clients, further empowering clients to gain full access to broadband in their homes.

Delineation of Deliverables and Outcomes Not Achieved and Explanation

- Stride achieved all deliverables and outcomes.

Discussion of Other Positive Results from Project

This project was tremendously impactful to Stride, partner agencies and their clients, and Stride students and graduates. In summary, through this innovative approach, The Stride Center exceeded the adoption targets, developed a replicable model and proved the concept of a social enterprise contact center.

Exceeded Adoption Targets and Developed a Replicable Model

In the beginning of this project, there was uncertainty and healthy skepticism as to whether this big idea would deliver big results. The concept of a consumer consultative call center to assist low-income callers with support to gain access to low cost broadband, low cost computer equipment and tech support was untested, and the contact center business was new to Stride. It is a credit to CETF that they were willing to support Stride and this concept and gave us the opportunity to test and prove the idea. There were plenty of challenges in the start-up phase, but ultimately Stride and its partners were successful in creating this highly effective model. There were a handful of key concepts and premises with which The Stride Center started that bear highlighting.

- A. One of the founding concepts of this project was that grantee partners who had access to the target communities and who had developed a strong, trusting reputation with them, would be responsible marketing and outreach to drive callers to the Stride Contact Center. In initial estimations, this element of the model was core to the overall success of the project and should, when possible, be included in future implementations. This included ensuring that Stride Contact Center agents would reflect the communities served by grantee partners and would speak the predominate languages of that community. The interchange and collaboration between Stride and grantee organizations ensured that callers would follow through and call the Stride Contact Center, and that the Stride Contact Center agents were trained on who the likely callers would be, and were prepared to provide services that would resonate with the callers.
- B. All of the contact center agents were students and graduates of the Stride Center. As a consequence, the agents were all low-income, well trained but new to technology in general, and consequently understood very well how important access to broadband at home is, and were sensitive to the clients because they could easily empathize and relate to them. This created a friendly engagement between agent and caller, and helped to ensure that the consultation provided was in simple, non-technical terms, broken down into clear and understandable elements, and was delivered in a respectful, non-judgmental manner. The Contact Center agents are from the community being served; and this played an essential role in the successful outcomes of this project.
- C. Stride built this project on a state-of-the-art platform utilizing Salesforce and 3CLogic as the CRM and ACD service providers. These platforms provided the technical infrastructure that ensured the ability to track activities, project trends and report outcomes with relative ease. Had this been built on a simpler, less sophisticated platform, the project would quickly have been overwhelmed and would not have been as successful, if at all successful.
- D. An element of this project's success which was not necessarily anticipated is the fact that Stride served as the contact center for Basic-Internet, a low cost internet service provider. This had several positive impacts:
 1. The Contact Center enrolled callers into low cost internet service in a single call, which streamlined the process, shortened the time to adoption and resulted in a higher adoption rate than through service providers with which Contact Center agents had no direct access.
 2. Basic-Internet was also marketing for subscribers independently, and their efforts allowed us to sign up low income men, women and families in greater numbers than would have been possible otherwise.
 3. The relationship with Basic-Internet put the Stride Contact Center in the position to be able to handle customer complaints, billing issues and general customer service. The rapport Contact Center agents had with customers enabled us to retain customers when they might otherwise have cancelled their subscriptions due to inflexible, unfriendly service center agents.

Proved Contact Center Social Enterprise Model

While not the primary purpose of this grant/project, through this program Stride was able to prove the Contact Center social enterprise model. Today there are customers who can be referenced, a deep understanding of the business environment and we are poised to expand, grow and replicate the business model. The benefit of this to students of The Stride Center is significant; because the social enterprise model requires that all agents are hired from the pool of student and graduate candidates so they can gain significantly from the experience. As mentioned above, agents at the Stride Contact Center gain relevant, marketable skills while serving as contact center agents – skills they will use to launch their own ICT careers. Growing and expanding the social enterprise ensures that more Stride students will have access to this important, career building experience and opportunity.

Overview of Major Challenges to Achieving Planned Results

Identify Major Challenges to Successful Implementation

The contact center experienced a number of challenges to implementing this ultimately very successful model. The 3 most important challenges included: learning to manage workload in anticipation of client outreach events; developing strategies to stay connected with clients when the service provider was not Basic-Internet; and adjusting strategies to respond to challenges and changing priorities.

Workload Management

One thing all of the CBO clients had in common was inexperience with projecting the call volume response to their outreach activities. This resulted in ongoing challenges for the contact center when planning agent staffing volumes and hours. A traditional contact center would not have even entertained this kind of business because it is impossible to manage service level outcomes when there is no way to project call volumes. Over time, Stride developed strategies to address this constant uncertainty.

Staying Connected

Several of the low cost broadband options were not affiliated in any way with The Stride Contact Center business. Comcast, for instance, required callers to call a separate phone number and sign up with agents who were often poorly informed about the details of the low cost offerings, and discouraged callers by making the process cumbersome, ill-informed and frustrating. Furthermore, because these “outside” carriers necessarily had their own processes, our ability to confirm that an adoption was successful was time consuming and manual, consequently requiring unanticipated resources.

Modifying Strategies

For most of the CBO clients, the concept of directing callers to a contact center for adoptions was new, and some grantees were new adoption champions all together. Especially in the first year, CETF grantees reorganized and adjusted outreach strategies. For instance, OTX found that their high school outreach campaigns weren’t working nearly as well as anticipated. The call volumes were anemic and adoptions were equally slow. When OTX determined that they needed to do more face to face events, The Stride Center worked with them to assign their contact center agent to attend their events, process basic-internet adoptions on site and deliver the hotspot at the time of purchase. This kind of collaborative problem solving was something a traditional contact center would not support; and the ability of The Stride Contact Center to make real-time strategic adjustments to support partners in achieving our mutual goals was necessary and unique to our business model.

Discuss Efforts to Address Challenges and Resolve Problems

Workload Management

The workload management challenge has proven to be one of the most vexing challenges in this project. Some outreach activities netted little or no response from callers, while others generated thousands of calls. When The Stride Center staff up the Call Center and no callers respond, the client is frustrated by having to pay for services which go underutilized. And, when The Stride Center doest staff up sufficiently to respond to volumes of calls, it misses opportunities for adoptions and more frustration ensues. The solutions have been varied but several strategies that have helped include:

- A. If a high volume of calls is anticipated, we bring on additional agents, but also program the call distribution system to offer callers the option of leaving messages to be returned within 24 hours, or schedule a call back. This way, if Stride Contact Center agent staffing levels do not allow for a high percentage of “answered calls” callers are not frustrated by sitting on hold for unacceptably long periods of time.
- B. When a high volume of calls is not expected but the possibility exists for increased volume, The Stride Center lines up agents to be available on short notice, and distribute calls to existing agents. Contact Center management monitors call volumes and triggers additional agents if necessary.
- C. For all cases, The Stride Center negotiates the service level agreement with grantee partners to ensure they understand that uncertainty in call volumes may result in more missed calls, and slower call back responsiveness. While this is not optimal, setting clear expectations with partners is essential in developing strong, engaged collaboration and ultimately meeting partner expectations.

Staying Connected

Following up on potential adoptions through non-partner service providers is extremely time consuming, requiring a level of staffing, and motivation by callers that were not fully anticipated in the initial planning process. In response, The Stride Center worked together to implement several solutions that allowed follow up with clients and document adoptions as follows:

- A. The arduous process of calling clients who expressed a desire for internet at home and confirming their adoptions was expensive, time consuming and the grant funding simply did not accommodate the cost. At the same time, the follow up process required very little training, so the Stride Center developed a volunteer opportunity for Stride students to donate their required volunteer time to the Contact Center. Volunteers were provided with a script, a list of calls to make and were given spreadsheets to document their findings. This proved to be a simple solution that served us well for the duration of the program.
- B. One of the more elegant solutions came from CETF's negotiations with Comcast, which allowed volunteers and staff to track Comcast adoptions by entering the caller phone number into a web-based application that verified when a caller had actually achieved adoptions. This proved to be a simple task agents could do between calls, or volunteers could effectively complete in brief windows of time.
- C. Some partners offered incentives such as free printers or free computers if they proved that they had successfully signed up for internet at home. This was a useful tactic, but still required follow up, administrative time and logistical transactions. Where possible, volunteers were utilized to coordinate and follow up with callers.

Modifying Strategies/Sharing Successes

The best way found to address issues and challenges was to build collaborative engagement with partners and maintain the utmost flexibility and willingness to experiment with new approaches. While, admittedly, this resulted in a number of failed experiments, it also revealed strategies that were shared with other CBO client partners. The Stride Center was in the unusual position to observe a number of different strategies, and to learn from partners what worked and what didn't. In some cases, the same strategy worked in certain scenarios and not in others. For instance, the strategy of attending events and selling internet hotspots didn't work very well at certain events, but did work well in others. OTX have good event success when held at schools, and shared that learning with BBK. The Stride Center attempted to be flexible with partners by attending events; selling hotspots and documenting adoptions on the spot, conducting outbound calls for partners, and testing a number of different call system structures. In the end, this level of flexibility, willingness to try new strategies and sharing those winning strategies with others made a significant difference.

V. Lessons and Recommendations

Summary of Lessons Learned

Lesson #1. When possible, hire contact center agents who have empathy and whose background may resonate with the target caller audience. That connection to the client established a welcoming, effective customer interaction.

Lesson #2. The Learning Community model CETF practice is easily and successfully adapted to work in smaller partner circles. And, be flexible enough to make real-time program and process modifications to respond to changes and new ideas.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Expanding the Project in Region or Scaling Up Statewide

Recommendation #1: The social enterprise contact center works and can be used effectively for future broadband adoption efforts and in other socially sensitive programs. The original idea for the Stride

Contact Center was based on the difficulty The Stride Center experienced in achieving adoptions goals, however small, in previous grants. A resource was needed with trained agents who could help individuals choose the options best aligned with their needs. This model of a full scope contact center has helped partner organizations. It required the development of a central resource. This central resource also needed to be staffed with individuals who were trained to assist the target audience to acquire the product they wanted, informed about challenges, and constantly updated on changes in offerings.

Recommendation #2: While the contact center model achieved its specific targets, we were not able to generate new customers to sustain the business. In retrospect, we should have worked hard to secure funding for a sales and marketing resource that may have generated new business for long term sustainability. In the future, if opportunities of this nature emerge, The Stride Center will build a budget model that provides for long term sustainability.

Recommendations to CETF Regarding Grants Management

None

VI. Grant Agreement Requirements

Purchased Equipment

Not applicable.

CETF of Grant Funds

All of the CETF grants funds were expended.