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Learn Computer Skills, Get a Free PC

Deal offered to parents in Richmond's troubled Iron Triangle

By: [Emily Bender, Richmond Confidential](#)

It's a Monday morning and five middle-aged Latino adults are gathered in the modest computer lab at the Nevin Community Center in Richmond. As they concentrate on their assignment, retyping an article from The New Yorker magazine, the room is quiet save for the hesitant tapping of computer keys. One woman leans forward intently, her eyes moving between screen and keyboard as she focuses on finding the right key.

After a few short classes, these students will take home a free computer. For many, it will be the first they've ever owned.

The students are taking part in a program sponsored by Opportunity West and several other local nonprofit organizations.

Backed by a \$500,000 grant from the California Emerging Technology Fund, program organizers plan to distribute 1000 refurbished PCs over the next two years. Eligible families must live inside the Iron Triangle and have a child enrolled in a local public school. Already, the group has given out about 250 computers to parents who have finished the training.

"We want to help bridge the digital divide in underserved communities by reaching parents who currently don't have a computer in their home," says project director Luis Perez.

The aim, he says, is to open up possibilities for both kids and parents.

"Everything is online now and no one uses the Yellow Pages anymore," Perez says. He adds that it's important for families to be able to easily access government and community services to see what they are eligible for and how to sign up or get more information.

For Richmond kids, having a computer and Internet access at home might make it possible to do research for a school assignment, use an online tutoring service or fill out college applications at night — especially important in neighborhoods where evening visits to the library might not be safe.

One 2003 study from the University of California, Santa Cruz, found that having a computer in the home increases the likelihood that a child will stay in school. It's true that computers might also offer distractions such as games, social media sites and music. But according to the study, kids with computers are highly likely to use them to complete homework assignments.

Some of the adult students come to the training class with basic computer skills and can help the person next to them, while others are starting from scratch. Last week, says instructor Renato Cazares, he taught an 80-year-old African-American grandmother who had never used a computer. (She was eligible since she is raising her grandchildren.) When she came to class, she didn't know how to turn on the computer.

Maria Montes has just finished her training and is here today to support her friend, Carolina Garcia, as she begins the course.

"It's pretty easy," says Montes about the training program. "I learned how to use e-mail and now I use it to send photos to my family back home in Sinaloa, Mexico."

She says her family is looking forward to receiving the free computer. "Every day my kids have been asking me when we are getting the new computer," says Maria, a mother of four.

The free eight-hour training is split up across several days and covers basic computer setup, Internet use, an introduction to

Microsoft Word and basic typing. It usually takes about a week to complete; the computer arrives about 10 days later.

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