

Camfield Estates-MIT Creating Community Connections Project

The Camfield Estates-MIT Creating Community Connections project is investigating strategies for bridging the "digital divide" (NTIA, 1995, 1997 & 1999) by examining the role of community technology in a low-income housing development, and its surrounding environs, for the purpose of community building. It is being conducted at Camfield Estates, a 102-unit, predominantly minority, low-income housing development in Roxbury, Massachusetts, and involves Camfield residents, and the associations, institutions (e.g., libraries, schools, etc.) and businesses within a 1.5 mile radius of Camfield Estates. Camfield Estates is also home to the Neighborhood Technology Center (NTC), a community technology center located on the premises, which serves additional housing developments in Roxbury.

The goals for the project are as follows:

- *To promote a stronger, healthier community at Camfield Estates.*
- *To establish greater levels of empowerment and self-sufficiency among residents at Camfield Estates.*
- *To create connections between residents at Camfield Estates, local organizations, neighborhood businesses, and other community members.*
- *To enable residents at Camfield Estates to be the creators and producers of their own information and content on the Internet.*
- *To establish Camfield Estates as a model for other housing developments across the country as to how individuals, families, and a community can make productive use of information and communications technology.*

The principal investigators for the project are Randal Pinkett, a Ph.D. candidate in the Epistemology and Learning Group at the MIT Media Laboratory, and Richard O'Bryant, a Ph.D. candidate in the Planning Support Systems Group in the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning.

The following individuals are also involved with the project:

- *Paulette Ford, President, Camfield Tenants Association (CTA)*
- *Nakia Keizer, Camfield Resident and MIT Community Fellow*
- *Thaddeus Miles, Director of Public Safety, Massachusetts Housing Finance Authority (MHFA)*
- *Wayne Williams, President, Williams Consulting Services and Director of the Camfield Estates Neighborhood Technology Center (NTC)*
- *Caroline Carpenter, Program Director, W.K. Kellogg Foundation*
- *Professor Mitchel Resnick, Epistemology and Learning Group, MIT Media Laboratory*
- *Professor Joseph Ferreira, Professor, Planning Support Systems Group, MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning*
- *Professor Ceasar McDowell, Director, Center for Reflective Community Practice, MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning*
- *Professor Dave Gifford, Programming Systems Research Group, MIT Laboratory for Computer Science*
- *Philip Greenspun, Founder and Chairman, ArsDigita Corporation*
- *Dave Mitchell, Microsoft Corporation*

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation has committed \$200,000 toward this project as a monetary grant, Hewlett-Packard has donated approximately \$100,000 of computer hardware as an in-kind equipment grant, RCN Telecom Services, a cable Internet provider in the greater Boston area, has agreed to provide a 50% discount off their cable-modem Internet connectivity, as an in-kind service grant, Microsoft Corporation has donated free copies of Microsoft Office, and ArsDigita is providing free technical assistance. With these resources, a community technological infrastructure has been established at Camfield Estates consisting of a computer and a high-speed Internet connection in each unit.

This project is also supported by grants from Lucent Technologies, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Institute for African-American Electronic Commerce (iAAEC), along with support from Youth Build of Boston, and the William Monroe Trotter Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

Community building is being accomplished using an asset-based approach to community building (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) that relies heavily on resident involvement and broad community participation in mapping and mobilizing community assets. This is coupled with comprehensive training for community members in community building and computer hardware and software, as well the availability of a database-backed web system currently undergoing development at MIT, the Creating Community Connections (C3) system.

C3 is a sociocultural constructionist (Pinkett, 2000) tool, specifically designed to create connections between residents, local associations and institutions, and neighborhood businesses, as a means toward a social and cultural resonance that achieves community engagement via technology. C3 was first developed and prototyped as part of an ongoing pilot study at federally-assisted, affordable housing development, Northwest Tower, in Chicago, Illinois, in collaboration with Nicol Turner at the Asset Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University (Turner & Pinkett, 2000).

The purpose of this project is to identify the critical success factors for integrating a community technology and community building initiative in a low-income housing development, and its surrounding environs. We anticipate that an asset-based approach to community building, coupled with socioculturally constructive community technology, will cause an increase in community social capital (Matesich & Monsey, 1997; Putnam, 1995) and will facilitate the activation of community cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Zweigenhaft, 1993), as a result of residents' involvement as active agents of change and active producers of community content.