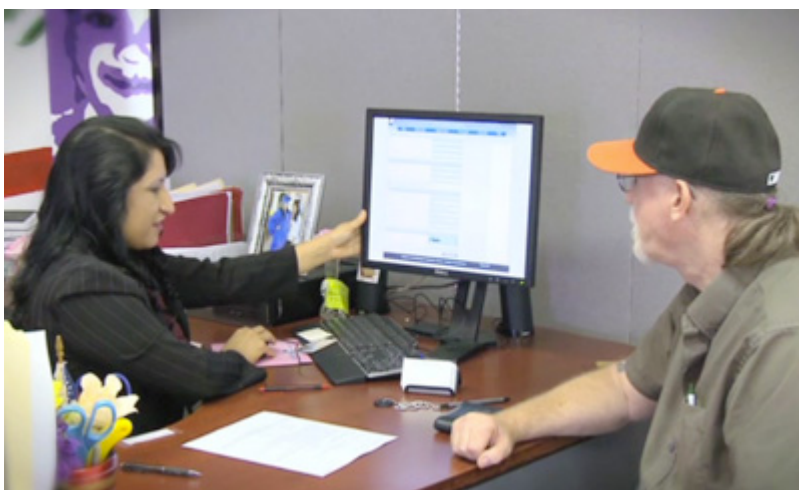


Community Partners help poor connect to benefits

November 8, 2013

WACO—Through the new [Community Partner program](#), community and faith-based organizations need just one thing to serve Texans who want to know about their eligibility for health benefits and other public assistance—an Internet connection.



A Community Partners volunteer at Epiphany Community Health Outreach Services in Houston helps a man apply for benefits online. The [Texas Hunger Initiative](#)—housed in the Baylor University School of Social Work and launched in cooperation with the [Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission](#)—has teamed up with the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, the Texas Association of Community Health Centers and Texas Impact to implement the Community Partner program.

According to a recent *New York Times* article, nearly 10 million Americans do not have access consistently to the Internet. Many need health benefits and other public services, and they have difficulty applying in an increasingly digital-oriented society.

Churches and other organizations that participate as Community Partners freely provide a computer and Internet access to people who wish to apply for benefits through the Texas Health and Human Services Commission. Texans in need can apply online for benefits, including food, cash and medical assistance by completing an application at www.yourtexasbenefits.com.

Jackie Fowler, a VISTA volunteer with [Texas Impact](#), is spearheading the effort through the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission by contacting churches, nonprofit and community-based organizations to pitch the program.

Churches ‘are there to help’

Churches are positioned well for this program because people who need benefits know the church is there to help, Fowler noted.

“Health and Human Services wants to give people the benefits they qualify for, but it is very difficult for people who qualify to get to offices,” she said. “A lot of people who qualify for the benefits don’t have access to get to (an office). They know faith communities are always the people who reach out to the needy. ... I am primarily contacting Baptist churches, primarily first Baptist General Convention of Texas members, all through Texas.”

Community Partners participate in the program at two levels. Level 1 Community Partners provide a computer and an Internet connection for people to complete the application online.

Level 2 Community Partners have on-site navigators available to assist people as they fill out the online application. Navigators must complete an online four-hour training session. All partners receive training, certification for staff and volunteers, and reports that show how many people they are helping.

Everyone benefits

All parties involved benefit from the program, Fowler insisted.

“This is one of the best win-win situations I have ever found, because basically there are so many people in the state of Texas who qualify for benefits that don’t know how to go about applying,” she said. “I feel like this is a wonderful opportunity for the faith community to reach out to their community ... and change lives.”

The program also offers churches one of the best outreach opportunities she has seen, because it allows the congregation to come face-to-face with its community, Fowler added. The church doesn’t have to worry about finding people in need. If a church is a Community Partner, the people in need will come to the church.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity for churches to get directly involved in meeting people in their neighborhood or community,” she said. “Anybody that is a navigator can have a part in changing a family’s life or a child’s life.”

How to join

Any organization can become a Community Partner at no cost. All navigators serve as volunteers, and people in need may apply online at the location for free.

Texas Impact launched the program in September and seeks to provide as many Community Partner locations as possible so all Texans who qualify for benefits can have access online.

For more information, visit http://www.hhsc.state.tx.us/hhsc_projects/cpp/.