Connecting Seniors with Computers’ Benefits

Senior Surfers Computer Club
Newark Senior Center
Newark, Delaware

The Challenge:

The Senior Surfers computer club was established in 1998 with seven members as a way to expand and share computer knowledge with other seniors, an unmet need at that time. Donations from AmeriCorps and club members provided the first 10 computers. To start, the club met once a month. Classes in software were held in the art room at the Newark Senior Center. But we knew we could help even more people.

Why Volunteers Were the Solution:

Our volunteers have been tapped for their expertise in a myriad of computer areas and are the key to the success of our computer club. With their time, resources, and talent, we continue to grow and improve the quality and array of services to our members.

How Volunteers Help Carry Out Our Mission:

Today the all-volunteer club has over 400 members and is one of the largest groups of its kind in the United States. Located within the Newark Senior Center, the club provides an opportunity for members to appreciate and have fun with today’s technology.

We have helped new computer users go from beginning skills in the computer and using the internet to advanced applications in software and other computer topics. Club members do weekly presentations on computer-related topics and teach hands-on classes in the lab. Outside resources are also invited to do presentations and classes. Special interest groups are available for Apple-related topics, ProShow Gold, Microsoft Office, and genealogy research.

The club offers one-on-one help in the lab and through written contact via our newly structured web site, which the members themselves designed. Computer club members volunteer for open lab sessions at designated times. Senior Surfers maintain computers in the main lab and the Senior Center library.

The state-of-the-art computer lab has 16 PCs, MAC computers and scanners, slide/VHS/CD/DVD converters, and various printers. It is fully funded and maintained by club dues and income from computer club classes, sale of refurbished donated computers, accessories and other related equipment. We also make it possible for seniors with limited funds to purchase a refurbished computer and other accessories through donations by our members.
Club members also are involved in community outreach. Our vice president does troubleshooting for the Senior Center employees and computers. An active member and instructor has offered sessions on Planning Your Exit Plan to our club, the senior center, and community organizations. Club board members represent the club at Newark Senior Center board meetings. Several of our members participate in the Meals on Wheels program, volunteer at the Newark Senior Center welcome desk, serve as guides for visitors, serve on program committees for the center, and are active in the community. Many of our members have been given various awards for their volunteering—Jefferson Awards, RSVP awards, and others.

The club is governed by an executive board of six elected officials who serve two-year terms. A minimum of two new elected people start their terms each year. Four officers are elected each year. These directors and committee chairmen attend a monthly meeting to discuss issues, report on happenings in their area, suggest topics for new presentations and classes, hear financial reports, and make recommendations and approvals on expenditures, usually for technology updates of the computer lab. The board is also responsible for a set of bylaws to insure consistent governance of our club and set policy as necessary.

Impact:

**For the Organization:** The computer club is the largest subgroup of the Newark Senior Center. This program enables us to keep current with computer technology and provide affordable training programs for our members. Our members with computer expertise help with the maintenance of other staff and library computers, which saves budgeted funds for other needed resources.

**For the People Served and Volunteers:** Those who attend the computer lab and classes are learning valuable skills, and members offering advice receive the satisfaction of helping their neighbors. In addition there is a group of people who make use of our website, blog and open meetings to gain added skills. Our member support sessions and user groups serve as an asset for gaining new skills.

**Funding and Resources:**

We rely on member dues to maintain our computer lab and make necessary purchases for it. Dues have been set at $5 per year and have not been raised since the club’s inception. Hands-on classes for members are $5 per session.

The Senior Surfers board of directors provides leadership and insight to find and nurture innovation to our club. Board members also monitor the spending of our limited funds to make the most of our resources.
**Value:**

The computer club gives valuable information on new innovations and programs to our members. Our members have offered programs to the entire senior center population that are well received and very valuable.

**Sustainability:**

Member involvement helps to maintain the club.

**Replicability:**

Below are the biggest lessons learned:

- Learn about your volunteers’ skills. There is a lot of valuable talent in the members of the Newark Senior Center and our computer club. People are the greatest resource, and that wealth of knowledge is there for the taking.

- When you’re recruiting potential volunteers, ask for their help individually instead of using a “Who wants to?” method. People who are approached with a “we need you” attitude are more likely to help or suggest others who can. This is true with any age group.

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