

## **News Feature**

### **COMPUTER PROJECT EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES**

October 4, 2006:

If Industry, Technology, Commerce and Energy Minister, Phillip Paulwell has his way, Jamaicans in every nook and cranny in the island will have access to computer technology including high speed internet services soon.

The foundation of his plan is based on an initiative known as CAPs or Community Access Points. The venture promises to empower people in inner-city and rural communities by providing a cluster of computers and related facilities such as scanning, copying and fax services that are already helping to transform the lives of residents in some of these areas.

“The focus is on broadening access, including eventually wireless broadband to reach even the most remote rural areas in partnership with Cable and Wireless which has provided the broadband technology that supports the project,” noted Paulwell.

He emphasized that in the information age, equipping persons with skills in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) was the surest route to defeat poverty by developing a skilled populace.

Project Manger, Richard Gordon says the recently launched initiative is showing every sign of achieving its objectives of strengthening citizens through access to knowledge in ICT.

“Students can do homework, download files etc. we are “e-efying” them through these centres,” he notes.

A core ingredient of the project is the access it provides to an open source software programme (Linux) that provides free access to popular Microsoft and other programmes, which would cost up to US\$450 per copy in the case of Microsoft Office to purchase.

“At that cost for software you could probably purchase a computer,” said Gordon, who notes that cost was a major factor impeding access to communications technology nationally.

However, residents in areas with CAPs can access these services for between \$60 to \$100 per hour or virtually free in instances where community associations partner with groups such as the Citizens for Justice or the Kingston Restoration Committee (KRC) to offset costs.

Centres are currently up and running at Burgher and Olympic Gardens, two inner-city communities in the Corporate Area, as well as at Santa Cruz in St. Elizabeth, with plans well underway for a further roll out across the island to nine (9) other centres soon.

The project forms part of the US\$23 million e-Jamaica programme which aims at maximizing Jamaica's ICT capacity to empower people to make optimum use of opportunities available in the information age, characterized by the rise of the knowledge economy.

Continuing, Gordon expressed confidence that the project would achieve its aims of making ICT services available to marginalized areas of the country at least cost.

"We have instructed all our centres to use the Linux software that is free and available and contains many strong tools that can access a wide range of applications. By this approach we feel we can realize big savings while ensuring the widest access," he emphasized.

Co-ordinator of the Olympic Gardens Civic Centre, Paula McKenzie notes that her centre collaborates with the HEART/NTA in training community members in data entry, customer service and early childhood training skills.

"We have trained over 200 persons in these areas since we started in August last year and they have been certified by HEART/NTA. We also operate an Internet café with five computers and provide services such as copying, fax, printing and the creation of web sites for a nominal fee," notes McKenzie.

Denise Buchanan, a teacher who utilizes the CAPs at the Eastern Peace Centre in the Burgher community as a homework centre agrees.

"The CAPs is valued by the community especially the children who use it to research school projects and for homework assignments," she notes.

"At the centre they can research many topics on the Internet, they can solve math problems by using some of the interactive programmes that show you how," she adds.

Buchanan who co-ordinates a homework centre at the venue, notes that since the computers were put in place two months ago over 40 children from the community have benefited in various ways.

A major focus of her attention is preparing students to sit the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT), which she notes is critical for them to get the best possible scores.

"This is important for them in order to stand the best chance to be placed at the school of their choice, we set aside specific days for each subject and make full use of the various Microsoft programmes," Buchanan noted.

Highlighting the community focus of the CAPs, Miss Buchanan praised the programme which she noted was geared to all the children in the community.

“We don’t turn back anyone,” said Buchanan.

Contact: Dwight Bellanfante  
Tel: 457-4809