

“Generations On-Line” Helps Older Adult Learners Bridge the Digital Divide

Overview Describing the Innovative Best Practice

The Digital Inclusion Community Service Initiative (DII) or “Generations On-Line” is a self-paced coaching, tutorial program that demonstrates how Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) participants can make an impact on reducing the digital divide often felt by seniors. This initiative teaches older adult learners, age 50 or over, how to navigate the Internet. The only qualifications to be part of DII are for learners to be age 50 or older and have the desire to learn basic computer skills. SCSEP participants serve as trained peer coaches. These peer coaches, who are also older adults, help reduce the anxiety felt by older adults who want to learn basic computer skills but are often intimidated by younger, faster-paced computer trainers and classes. DII learners complete the Generations On-Line web-based tutorial at their own speed. Learning to navigate the Internet helps reduce older adult learners’ feelings of isolation - of being “left-out”, and promotes the value of lifelong learning. According to research, lifelong learning leads to improvements in physical and emotional well-being.

CMJTS offers DII at two sites: the Cambridge Library where classes are held three days a week, two hours each day, and the Mora WorkForce Center where classes are held three days a week, three hours each day.

Central Minnesota Jobs and Training Services (CMJTS) has been a SCSEP provider for the past four years - assisting those over 55 to enhance their work skills at employer host sites while they seek part-time employment. Now through special funding provided by Senior Services America, Inc., CMJTS has been able to help seniors address another hurdle they often face – using current technology. The Digital Inclusion project began as a pilot in January 2010 and continued through June 2010. Because of the success of the pilot, CMJTS was awarded a grant from SCSEP to continue the DII project from July 1, 2010 through June 30, 2011.

Job Seeker Impact

Adults who have completed the DII Generations on-Line tutorial find they have increased their marketable job skills needed in our changing economy. Today’s jobs are often found and applied for on-line. The Digital Inclusion Initiative teaches individuals how to search on-line, how to send and receive e-mails, and how to apply for jobs on-line. The following is an example of what this self-paced, peer-coached program meant to a recent older learner. “Jane” (not her real name) attended a community computer training class but found she could not keep up with the class due to its fast-paced instruction. She had no computer skills and was afraid of computers. In fact, Jane had lost her job for lack of computer skills. She attended two coaching sessions of the DII, then applied for a job and received an interview but was not selected for the job because she lacked computer skills. After attending a few more sessions of the DII, she applied for a job on-line, was selected for an interview, and was hired. Had Jane not gotten the

computer training available in which she could learn at her own pace, she would not have gotten the job.

Community Impact

To date, CMJTS/SCSEP has coached 57 learners. Forty have graduated from DII and some have moved on to higher levels of computer training. Peer coaches have observed signs of improvement of the participants' personal health and well-being. Educated and happy individuals contribute to a healthy, more educated, vibrant community. Seniors who previously may have had no computer skills are now able to communicate on-line with potential employers, family, and friends. For many it has enhanced their quality of life and has led them to additional opportunities to be become contributing members in their communities.

Identification of those involved, including collaborators:

Senior Community Service Employment Program
Central Minnesota Jobs and Training Services
Mora WorkForce Center
Cambridge Library

Leveraging/alignment of outside resources

Cambridge Library computers (6)
Adult Basic Education and/or DEED computers (4) in the Mora WorkForce Center
Generations Online - curriculum/training program from Senior Services America, Inc. (SCSEP funding)
SCSEP wages for SCSEP peer coaches
CMJTS supervision, administration and CMJTS staff in the Mora WorkForce Center.

Ideas for replication/lessons learned

The current program and related paperwork is regulated by Senior Services America, Inc. The Generations Online tutorial is available by site license. Because of this licensing, email accounts provided by the training to learners are only accessible at the training site. To overcome this barrier, learners are given assistance to open free email accounts to continue further communication or access additional training beyond the DII program. As the adult learner's confidence builds, staff refers interested learners to higher-level training opportunities within or near their communities.