

Light of Life Family Assistance Program-Women's Center

915 Western Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15233

Student Consultant, Anushka Nethisinghe

Community Partner, Sherry Ramsier

I. Situation Description

Organization

The Light of Life Family Assistance Program is a private non-profit Christian agency that has four locations around Pittsburgh. The one at the address above, located in NorthSide, is specifically for homeless women with children under the age of 17 and who are recovering from some type of substance abuse. The women are often referred to or hear about the program and enroll. The Light of Life organization accepts between 10 and 15 women each year. Women start and finish the program at different times

The purpose of the program is to support these women, and their children, and help educate them about how to lead a more fulfilling life. The women are advised not to have jobs during the time they are enrolled in the program because it is an all day, everyday event. The program lasts for one year. To stay in the program, participants must not use illegal substances and must maintain good attendance.

During their time in the program, the participants have to take several classes ranging from Bible study to managing finances to parenting. They must also complete several homework assignments and do chores during their enrollment in order to pass each of their classes and graduate. All of the activities and services provided are coordinated by three staff members, Sherry Ramsier, who is the director, Hannah Stevens, and Michelle Pace. While the women are in the program, the Light of Life organization assists them in finding housing and paying for rent. It also offers childcare programs for when the women are in their group sessions. The organization keeps close ties with its graduating members, who are succeeding around the country.

Facilities

The Light of Life organization occupies the third floor of a building located at 915 Western Avenue. There are large two computer rooms, one for lessons and the other for general usage. There are also two kitchens, two daycare areas, five office rooms, two conference rooms, multiple storage rooms, and also a laundry room. Each of the staff has their own office, and the conference rooms are used to conduct group sessions or classes for the women. There is an intercom system set up through the entire facility and to enter the building from the main road you must ring a bell and be buzzed in, through a video security device, by one of the staff.

Programs

The current program involves many different classes: accounting, computer class, parenting class, bible study, etc. A local university professor teaches a computer class twice a week. He works with the women in small groups showing them basic computer skills, primarily Microsoft Office, in the computer room for lessons. Sherry, Hannah and Michelle teach the rest of the programs and classes. The women must attend certain programs, however, in general they are allowed to come in and out of the facilities whenever they chose. The main computer room has full access computers that are there to encourage extra-curricular use and aimed to help the women apply their acquired knowledge and explore their creativity.

Staff

Sherry, Hannah, and Michelle are always on hand and they run all of the classes, except for the computer class. They are also in charge of the daycare when the women come in for their classes. They personally interact with the people who attend the program and they would be the ones that the computer users would go to if they encountered difficulties. The staff members have been there for 7 or more years and play a crucial role in determining the structure of the classes that will take place in the organization. They also have to keep track of the performance of each one of the students. They have checklists for attendance, chores and personal evaluations. A lot of these things are done by filling out forms.

Aside from Sherry, none of the other staff uses the computers at the organization. Sherry uses the computer in her office to type up bi-weekly evaluations of the students and for e-mailing purposes. Hannah has a computer at home but does not use it for anything work related. Michelle does not have a computer at home or at work so her only computer contact is by using Sherry's computer. Neither Hannah nor Michelle has e-mail accounts. Since they have not integrated computers into their work, the staff (with the exception of Sherry) is not as knowledgeable or as confident as they need to be in order to help the women and children participants.

In the past, Sherry has been the primary caretaker of the computers. Because she was limited in understanding, knowledge and skill, she was not confident enough to deal with problems herself. She relied on technicians, usually a family member or a friend, to handle any technical difficulties. Up until now any previous problems with the computers was dealt with by technicians. In mid-April, the Light of Life organization brought on a technical manager to oversee any computer questions and problems that came up at any of the locations. He will set up the LAN and take care of any future problems with the network or the computers.

Technical Environment

At the beginning of the consulting period, the organization had 4 Windows 95 computers with only 524 MB of memory, no sound card, no graphics card, no CD-ROM drives, and no Windows Office capabilities (see Charts of Technical Environment: Table 1 in Appendix for specifications). They did have ethernet cards but no Internet connection. They also had over 20 different types of adult and children learning software. Some of the software was outdated and a lot of the software required specifications that the computers did not meet. Most of the software that was for the Windows computers ran on version 3.0, which the organization didn't have.

Aside from these computers, which were for general usage purposes, there were four computers in the classroom area and one computer in Sherry's office (see Charts of Technical Environment: Table 1 in Appendix for specifications). Of all these computers, Sherry's was the only one with Internet connection, which she got through Western PA Internet service provider. In addition to the computers, the organization was equipped with four printers. The one in Sherry's office was an IBM Laser Printer. There were two in the general usage room, one HP DeskJet 660C and one HP DeskJet 540. The last printer was located in the classroom and was a HP LaserJet 1100.

II. Focus of Consulting Partnership

The following are the main problems and opportunities focused on during the consulting period. A full chart of the timeline of work conducted is in the Appendix under Work Plan Chart.

A. Improve Technical Environment

At the beginning of the consulting period, the technical environment was inadequate and would severely limit their ability to carry out their mission. They had old computers that could not support the newer software packages that were important to the program, such as Encyclopedia Britannica, some GED software, Mavis Beacon for Adults, and more. Our original plans were to upgrade the computers, adding RAM, CD-ROM drives, sound and graphics cards, speakers, headsets, and new monitors so that the software they had would be able to run on them. Luckily the Board of Directors at the main Light of Life office approved the purchase of new computers for the center and upgrades were not necessary.

Four brand new computers arrived in April. They were Symantec computers running on Windows ME with 1.5 GB of memory and 64 MB of RAM (See Charts of Technical Environment: Table 2 in Appendix for specifications). Each of them came with a graphics card, an ethernet card, and a sound card. Speakers and headsets were also ordered and will arrive in May. In addition, the Light of Life organization has ordered DSL for all its locations and a technician will come and connect all of the computers and install DSL within the next month.

With the arrival of new computers, Sherry was faced with sorting through the old software and old hardware, deciding what to keep and what to throw away. Comparing the specifications for the software to the old and new computers, Sherry mastered how to match software requirements with hardware specifications.

Outcomes:

- The old software was discarded.
- The more updated software was kept and installed, such as Monopoly Junior, Encyclopedia Britannica, and Mavis Beacon.
- Sherry's knowledge of computers has increased to the level that she can now decide what types of software are compatible with the computers and what the capabilities of the computers are.
- Sherry has outlined potential projects for the women and children to do on the computers.

Sustainability:

The Light of Life organization receives many donations of software from schools, members of the community and other donating groups. Now that Sherry has a clear understanding of the resources she has, she will be able to decide what software can be used and what cannot. In addition, the organization gets new members throughout the year. Any student project that was implemented with the existing students must also be taught to the new students. As a result, Sherry will have to maintain her knowledge in order to help the present and future women entering the Light of Life Ministry.

Recommendation & Resources:

Now that Sherry has an understanding of computers and the software that the organization has, keeping track of them so that she knows what she does and does not have. In addition, keeping track of this kind of information will reduce redundancies in the types of software that they acquire by comparing it to ones they own without having to manually go through all of them. A few of the types of information that she should keep track of are, software titles, license numbers, where the software came from, cost, what computers they are on, and any other details Sherry feels important enough to account for. This information can be stored in a MS Access database that she is creating. The particulars of this database are discussed below.

This website, <http://www.bankinfo.com/tech/hsinventory.html>, contains the article Knowing What You Have: Keeping Track of Hardware & Software. This article provides excellent guidelines for and examples of the types of information useful to keep track of software and a technical environment in general. Using this as a template for the types of information that should be stored would result in a thorough collection of technical data that will be useful in evaluating or upgrading the environment.

B. Staff Computer Knowledge and Skills

The staff was neither familiar nor comfortable with using computers. This was a problem because they were the ones that the students and children would come to if they ever needed help on the computers. Initially, Sherry and I felt that it would be effective to have lessons for Michelle and Hannah, but who would teach the lessons and what would be the evidence that suggested they understood what they were learning?

Instead of a tutorial type teaching method, Hannah, Michelle, Sherry, and I all decided that it would be better to assign individual projects to them pertaining to their work. We started out with basic Internet skills such as browsing the web, learning how to access websites that they needed to use or were interested in, how to download graphics and video clips off the web, and some shortcuts when filling out forms or logging into web accounts. They also set up their own hotmail accounts and learned how to send and view messages and attachments. This knowledge is expected to come in handy when the students have to set up their own e-mail accounts and learn how to browse the web once the organization gets DSL. Then Michelle and Hannah will be able to help them if they have any problems.

Outcomes

- Hannah now uses Microsoft Excel to keep track of demographic data on the program's participants.
- Hanna and Michelle now send and check email daily.
- Sherry corresponds via e-mail, even sending attachments and forwards.
- Sherry created a PowerPoint presentation.
- All the staff is comfortable searching the Internet.

Sustainability:

Sitting together and just going over her work and translating it onto the computer has greatly widened her scope of computer vision. With her new technical confidence, Sherry is now able to be in charge of activities involving the computer, such as working with e-mail and word processing. She can be an advisor to the women and the staff when they have questions about using the computer. On top of this, Sherry is creating documentation of all the basic computers skills that the whole staff has learned throughout the last four months. The documentation, especially the ones for e-mail and Internet usage will be laminated and put near the general use computers so that the women and children can look at the directions for how to navigate through the computer on their own.

In addition, the staff will be the people responsible for showing the women how to set up their own e-mail accounts and how to access the list server that the Light of Life Ministries is planning on starting. Since they will have to do this every time a new student is admitted it is an ongoing process that will ensure sustainability of their knowledge.

C. Director's Information System

Most of the paperwork that Sherry has to do regards student evaluations. There are a lot of aspects about the students that Sherry has to keep track of, including attendance, homework, chores, attitude, and overall performance in the program. Up until now, all of that information was gathered and organized manually, with pen and paper. Sherry sought a technical solution. We decided that the best way to collect and report on these data was to create a simple database. We selected MS Access because it was already available on-site. Her familiarity with the Microsoft Office made it easier for her to learn Access.

We started out by going over how to create a simple table, how to choose field names and a key, and how to understand the structure of a database. After showing her the basics, Sherry filled out the rest of the tables on her own making checklists for chores, importing Word Documents that keep track of students' weekly evaluations, and monitoring other demographic statistics. Being able to converge this data into one database allows Sherry to have quick access to any information that she needs to update or provide to her director or just to give to students as progress reports.

Outcomes:

- Sherry has entered all the information about program participants, converting much of it from Word.
- She tracks all information about the students that she needs to monitor their progress and status in the program. As a result, at any moment she can check on whether a participant has completed her responsibilities.
- Sherry generates statistical reports from the database in a few minutes rather than days.
- Sherry has already started thinking about how these files can be shared on a network so that, with a password, a student can go into their folder and see their progress.

Sustainability:

Sherry finds Access quite straightforward to use, so updating the information and using the database to do it should not be hard for her. She is motivated to keep the database updated because she needs to provide information reports to the Director of Programs in the main Light of Life office. Sherry now sends reports to the Director as email attachments and reports.

Sherry can carry the database around and work on it at home or on her laptop without having to take stacks of papers with her. Even though the organization emphasizes the importance of hard copies, storing a large amount of data via computers consumes very little space. Filing cabinets and boxes of files consume massive amounts of space.

Recommendation & Resources:

The next step, now that the database is set up, is to expand it or create new ones to include data not just pertaining to the women. The database can also be used to keep track of the types and number of computers they have, among other technical equipment. Sherry has plans to buy a scanner, a digital and video camera, and, maybe, a projector. Having a detailed inventory list will not only benefit the women's center by organizing such technical information, but it could also help the other Light of Life locations by being a template for comparison.

As mentioned above in **A. Improving the Technical Environment**, another use for the database could be to store the detailed information about the types of software that the organization has. Using a database to do this instead of manually doing it will not only increase time efficiency but also allow for complex queries and instant retrieval. The following two websites are geared toward helping people use MS Access.

- <http://www.mvps.org/access/index.html> - This website is a well-organized FAQ page. There is an easy to follow Table of Contents from which I believe the section on Queries and Tables would be most beneficial because those are the features being used the most in the database. If any common problems arise while Sherry is trying to expand on her tables and create queries this would be a great place to look for quick answers to troubleshooting.
- <http://www.helptalk.net/forums/access/> - Unlike the above website, this one offers an interactive environment, allowing the user to post questions and read other peoples comments about MS Access. If the previous site does not provide adequate information or the specific question that arouse in not in that site, this site would be a place to post the question and receive feedback. This site gives the options of searching for a specific topic, viewing that day's posts, or viewing all posts on all subjects. To send a question or comment, you would simply click on the "Post New Message" link, fill out the provided form and send it in.

III. Additional Recommendations

Using a Group Mailing List

The women in the Light of Life organization are in the program for one year. During that year they are given support and helped to assimilate back into society after the ordeals they have gone through. Towards the end of the year, they start to have more freedom, to get them accustomed to becoming independent. However, that initial transition out of the organization is always hard because they suddenly lose that support that was there for the past year. Some of the graduates keep in touch, but for most, time does not permit them to make that extra trip to visit.

One way to combat this is to create a mailing list that enables past, present, and possibly, future women of the Light of Life Organization to keep in touch with one another. It also allows the organization to notify people of events and news that may be of relevance to them. Another extremely good purpose it serves is to get funding for in-home computers or Internet connection for the women. The implementation of such a mailing list is a strong argument for helping the students get connected.

There are some very useful resources out there which help set up this type of e-mailing/discussion list on the web.

- <http://www.topica.com/create/index2.html> - This website offers the capability to set up a newsletter and discussion list online. It is free, but you do have to sign up in order to start the service. After you sign up, by clicking on the “sign up now” tab, there is another tab that says, “start a list.” Clicking here will begin the process of setting up a list and entering all the specifications for your list. There is also a well-organized help section that allows you to search for any questions or problems you are having.
- <http://www.elistx.com/services/elists.html> - This website acts as a mailing list management service. It does cost about \$10/month to keep this mailing list, but they have some great options that you can add to tailor the mailing list for the specific types of information you want to get across. Again, you have to register for this service, but registration is free. Then you may set up the list and define its specifications.

Not knowing how this type of project will turn out, it is probably best to start with the free service and see how much response you have from the students. It is important that they identify where their local Internet connection facility is, and once they do that see how willing they are to use it. Initially it will be slow, and since this year’s students are reaching their end at the ministry, it will be hard for them to get used to it. They would definitely be a great test group to see how graduates can benefit from this resource, since its primary goal is to help them after they have left the comfort of their support group.

When setting up the mailing list, the staff will be allowed to dictate the specifics of it, such as who can sign up, what type of discussion goes on (moderated/unmoderated), whether or not the messages are to be screened by the staff, who can read the messages, whether or not the messages are also sent out to everybody subscribing to the list, and other characteristics

In discussing this idea with the staff members, it was decided that it would be most beneficial to have the staff learn how to create and use the mailing list and teach the women how to use it.

1. First the staff would use the above resources to set up and activate the mailing list. Carefully following the directions together will be the first process to familiarize them with its usage.
2. Hannah and Michelle would then have to teach the women how to use the mailing list. In addition, they would have to implement a plan to make its use more frequent in the students' lives so that they will become comfortable using it.
3. After they graduate, it is up to the Light of Life staff to initiate and keep up the contact between the students. Finding other past, present or future members living near one another is a great way to start continuing support after independence from the organization. Also, arranging meetings and activities that involve different generations of graduates will also help in securing bonds and giving support to women long after they are on their own.

2. Develop Student Activities that Use Computers

Managing Personal Finances

Hannah, one of the staff members, runs a “store”. When the women do their chores they are given a pretend “paycheck” that they can use towards purchases at the store. The purpose of this is to teach the students how to manage their money and balance checkbooks.

Right now the women handle their accounts manually, by hand. Adding the software program, Quicken, to this activity will integrate an excellent technical tool into an important learning lesson. Quicken is setup like a checkbook and it has budgeting and reporting capabilities. Quicken provides the structure needed for the women to practice how to handle money. The website <http://www.shopintuit.com>¹ has information on purchasing and using the software (see Website Resources in Appendix for further detail about this site).

Hannah's “store” could have a computer where all the transactions are stored. The women could then, through the LAN, check their purchases and update their spending. An added benefit of adding a computer in the store and automating the process is the ability to use the technology to mimic credit card purchases. Sherry mentioned how difficult it was to teach the women how to manage spending money with a credit card and how the interest payments worked. Right now, it is too complicated to manually simulate credit card transactions, but with a computer it could be possible.

Computer Literacy

Another problem that the computer class faces is the lack of interest in learning basic computer usage. One way of overcoming this is to instigate projects that pertain to the women's lives so that, not only will the product be useful to them, but they will also be motivated to generate results. The personalization of projects will also help solidify their understanding of what they did to create it.

Here are a few examples of potential projects and what resources are most useful. Descriptions of the resources are listed under Website Resources in the Appendix on the last page.

1. A better way to teach Microsoft Word is to create projects that will eventually be useful to the user. For example, when the women apply for jobs they will probably be required to write a resume, letters of request, correspondence letters and other types of technical communication documents. <http://www.io.com/~hcexres/tcm1603/achtml/acctoc.html>² is a website that has a great tutorial for how to write several major types of documents used in a work environment. The women can use the examples and templates on this site to construct their own documents.
2. Excel can be difficult to learn because there are so many commands. Using excel to create budgeting documents or health records for their children will help the women learn and remember how to use it while producing a worthwhile output. The excel tutorial, <http://www.cant.ac.uk/title/tutorials/excel.htm>³ would be useful in this case.
3. Making presentations or documentaries about their thoughts and experiences, either in life or with the Light of Life organization is a great creative outlet that allows the women to explore more with the computer than they thought possible. PowerPoint is also a great tool that allows them to use technology to clearly convey their thoughts and experiences. The PowerPoint tutorial at <http://www.cit.cornell.edu/atc/materials/FLEX/docs/PPoint2000.pdf>⁴ is beneficial in learning basic commands and how to put together a simple yet professional presentation.
4. Another valuable project is creating a website. Using the <http://trfn.clpgh.org/>⁵, <http://hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey/>⁶ and <http://www.trellix.com/product/trellixweb.asp>⁷, the women can build their own websites for their personal and/or creative needs. They can also use it as evidence of their computer literacy when applying for jobs because it is physical evidence of their knowledge.

APPENDIX

I) Charts of Technical Environment

Past: Table 1

Computer	OS	HD space	RAM	Processor	Extra	Other
Sherry's Computer (1)	Windows 98	4 GB	60 MB	AMD-K6™ 3D processor	Sound Card Ethernet Card Graphic Card	-Dialup Internet -Office 97 -Speakers
Classroom Computers (4)	Windows 98	19 GB	64 MB	Pentium III	Sound Card Ethernet Card	-Speakers -Office 97
General use Computers (4)	Windows 95	524 MB	8 MB	Pentium	Ethernet Card	-None

Present: Table 2

Computer	OS	HD space	RAM	Processor	Extra	Other
Sherry's Computer (1)	Windows 98	4 GB	60 MB	AMD-K6™ 3D processor	Sound Card Ethernet Card Graphic Card	-Dialup Internet -Office 97 -Speakers
Classroom Computers (4)	Windows 98	19 GB	64 MB	Pentium III	Sound Card Ethernet Card	-Speakers -Networked -Office 97
General use Computers (6)	Windows ME	4 GB	64 MB	AMD Douron™ processor	Sound Card Ethernet Card Graphic Card	-Office 97 (4)

II) Work Plan Chart

(Next page)

Project: Configure computers and implement technology		Responsible	Target	Jan				Feb				March				April				May			
Simplify student report management				1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Identify Goals																							
	Talk to staff	consultant		■																			
	Talk to students	consultant/cp/staff		■																			
	Talk to computer teacher	consultant/cp		■																			
Evaluating Existing Technology and Environment																							
	Types of computers and memory	consultant	23-Jan	■																			
	Types of software; compatibility	consultant	23-Jan	■																			
	Location/setup of computers (important for children)	consultant/cp	23-Jan	■																			
	Accessibility of printers (what software can be used)	consultant	23-Jan	■																			
Software																							
	Talk to staff see what software they want	consultant	30-Jan	■																			
	Talk to students see what software they want	consultant/cp/staff	30-Jan	■																			
	Talk to computer teacher see what software they want	consultant/cp	30-Jan	■																			
	Evaluate compatibility (may call for computer upgrade)	consultant	6-Feb		■																		
	Install software that has been agreed on	consultant/cp	20-Feb		■			■															
Technology and Environment																							
	Setup computer environment for optimal usage	consultant/cp	13-Mar											■									
	Update computers		1-May																		■		
	<i>Compare with software available</i>	consultant	6-Feb		■																		
	<i>Evaluate budget vs. need</i>	consultant/cp	8-Mar											■									
	<i>Setup newly obtained computers</i>	consultant/cp/staff	8-Mar											■									
Create and Implement Database																							
	Determine purpose and setup of database	consultant/cp	10-Apr																				
	Create and implement database	consultant/cp	10-Apr																				
Training																							
	Immediate software training	consultant/cp/staff	8-Mar																				
	<i>How to use the software</i>	consultant/cp/staff	8-Mar																				
	<i>How to show others to use the software</i>	consultant/cp/staff	19-Mar																				
	<i>What is the best way to help children on the computer</i>	consultant/cp/staff	3-Apr																				
	Interactive long term training	consultant/cp/staff	1-May																				
	<i>Interact with students and their children around the computer to see the types of problems arise and figure out how to solve them cooperatively</i>	consultant/cp/staff	1-May																				

III) Website Resources

¹ <http://www.shopintuit.com> - Sells the Quicken software and gives you options between what version would best fit the organization. They have descriptions and frequently asked questions about each version.

² <http://www.io.com/~hcexres/tcm1603/achtml/acctoc.html> - This technical communication tutorial provides a variety of examples and shows how to create important documents used in a work environment.

³ <http://www.cant.ac.uk/title/tutorials/excel.htm> - In addition to the help feature in Microsoft Windows, this tutorial for Excel has graphics that make it easy to learn how to use this application and follow along.

⁴ <http://www.cit.cornell.edu/atc/materials/FLEX/docs/PPoint2000.pdf> - Along with the help feature in Microsoft windows, this PDF PowerPoint usage guide is nicely organized and easy to follow because of graphic examples.

⁵ <http://trfn.clpgh.org/> - TRFN offers free web hosting for local nonprofit organizations and government agencies, including training, support and email. You have to sign up in order to receive these benefits.

⁶ <http://hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey/> - This is a good website that teaches HTML basics. For first time users a tour is probably recommended. The link for the tour is on the upper right-hand corner. Under the title “The How-To Library”, on the left side of the page, there are multiple links to web design tutorials.

⁷ <http://www.trellix.com/product/trellixweb.asp> - This website provides free software and supplies a list of companies that will host your site for free or for a cost. There is also a tutorial about how to create a website and add graphics and other features.