Operation Weed and Seed – Context Analysis
Student Consultant, Michael Olson
Community Partner, Stephen Chatman

I.   The Consulting Situation

About the Organization

Operation Weed and Seed is a joint federal, state and local coordinated law enforcement and community investment initiative sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice under the local leadership of the Office of the Mayor and the United States Attorney. Operation Weed and Seed has two main aspects: "Weed," the crime reduction element, and "Seed," the community development aspect. The focus of this project is on the Pittsburgh Operation Weed and Seed branch's community technology investments. Funds or equipment are provided to Community Technology Partners who maintain resources for use by community residents.

Community Technology Partners are established in target communities to:
- Add or expand computer and Internet technology components to existing after school and summer activities.
- Build on and learn from the programmatic and instructional successes of existing community sites.
- Create a Wired Community which reaches out to a site's extended family: community groups, neighborhood organizations, school and libraries in the area, and recommend ways that Internet resources can be used to bridge the gap among them all.
- Enhance workforce development, literacy and computer skills.

More than thirty technology centers currently exist in the Pittsburgh communities of Hazelwood, Homestead, East Liberty, and Homewood. Although the Hill District is no longer a Weed and Seed focus area, the community still retains several technology centers and was a Weed and Seed focus area from 1992 to 1997. The community technology sites are established within the facilities of a wide variety of organizations, and the resources can be located anywhere within the organization's facilities. At some locations they have their own room and focus, and in other locations they are part of a larger recreational or educational environment.

Additionally, the technology centers in the community vary greatly in their sophistication and technological capacity. The base installation for any site is two computers, a printer and a scanner while some sites have as many as twenty to thirty computers, sizable computer labs. When purchased, the computers and peripherals at the centers are modern equipment, but if not maintained by the organizations the equipment becomes outdated. Weed and Seed does not automatically provide for updates to equipment, but organizations are free to submit additional requests for new or updated equipment.

Operation Weed and Seed currently requests no further information or communication from Community Technology Partners after their establishment. There are no standard lines of communication between the two and Operation Weed and Seed receives no updates on the status of sites, their equipment, or even the proper personnel to contact with questions. As a requirement for the establishment of each technology site, organizations are required to have Internet access so community members who use the centers can communicate with others via the Internet. This leaves the potential for Internet communication between the Weed and Seed office and Community Technology Partners that is currently unutilized.

For external communication, Weed and Seed relies primarily on word of mouth among interested community members and its website maintained with the city of Pittsburgh. The program does not currently advertise its activities or resources outside of the Internet, so increased advertising in the communities could lead to a greater utilization of existing resources.

Consulting Tasks

For this term, the consultant worked with Stephen Chatman, the Assistant Coordinator of the Operation Weed and Seed office. In order to address the situation of the Community Technology Partners, it was determined that the first step would have to be bridging the current gap in communication between Operation Weed and Seed and the Community Technology Partners. The following tasks addressed this underlying problem.

Consulting Task 1: Evaluate Impact of Community Technology Partner Sites

Community Technology Partner sites are established to foster economic development, encourage education and training, and provide social and recreational opportunities in the community. At present, however, Weed and Seed is unable to evaluate the sites' abilities to address these goals. Weed and Seed requests no information from Community Technology Partners after their establishment and, with no feedback from the centers, Weed and Seed cannot evaluate what the centers are being used for. This prevents Weed and Seed from estimating the impact that these investments are having on the community.

The consultant's task was to develop and administer, with the assistance of the Office of the Mayor, a survey on current Community Technology Center operations as well as recommend a formal method of reporting in the future to ensure a flow of information between Operation Weed and Seed and the Community Technology Partners. The student consultant and the community partner developed a questionnaire for Community Technology Partners that was mailed to each site. The student consultant and community partner also visited Community Technology Partner sites to evaluate their setup in terms of ease of accessibility, usability, and offered services. Based on the areas that were determined to be most critical for effective evaluation and coordination of existing resources, the student consultant and community partner developed communication recommendations for the Community Technology Partner steering committee to assess and implement.

Consulting Task 2: Create a Plan for Community Technology Partner Steering Committee

Without standards for communications, it is difficult to assess the status of Community Technology Partners or assess opportunities for improvement and leverage of resources. Standards for operation, advertisement and access could be used to make it easier to evaluate a site's performance and help it achieve the optimal community impact. A lack of operating standards could be an issue if Community Technology Partners do not work to keep pace with current technology. If community technology centers do not advertise their available resources, it will be difficult for the community to know of the opportunities available for them. This task serves Weed and Seed's mission by sponsoring a community discussion whose aim is the growth of all Community Technology Partners through shared information.

The consultant's task was to develop a recommendation for a Community Technology Center steering committee that will develop policies and guidelines of center operations, advertisement, and access. The student consultant and the community partner visited Community Technology Partner sites to interview administrators regarding their thoughts on the program as well as receiving factual information regarding current methods of advertisement, policies on equipment upkeep, and any existing policies on access to the site's equipment. In addition, information was gathered on what types of hardware and software are being used, educational programs offered, and the usage patterns of the different sites. Subsequent to these interviews and the return of the site's surveys, the student consultant and the community partner produced a document outlining priorities for a Community Technology Partner steering committee.

II.   Outcomes and Recommendations

Analysis of Outcomes

During the consulting period, work accomplished consisted of three major tasks.
1. The estimation of community technology investments through surveys, site visits, and interviews
2. The creation of a steering committee recommendation using information gathered in the first work task

These tasks are explained in further detail below.

1. Evaluate Impact of Community Technology Partner Sites

Community investments made by Operation Weed and Seed are valuable resources for the communities that Weed and Seed targets. Unfortunately, Weed and Seed does not currently monitor investments after their establishment and it was unable to ascertain the status of any of its community technology investments.

<u>Results</u>

For this work task, surveys were sent out to all Weed and Seed Community Technology Partners to receive feedback from as many sites as possible. In addition, site visits and interviews were conducted to obtain the most thorough analysis possible in the given timeframe.

In the return of the surveys, it was discovered that much of the contact information Weed and Seed had was out of date. Several host organizations had closed since their last contact with Operation Weed and Seed, and the equipment that they hosted was unaccounted for. At other sites, equipment had been ill maintained and was no longer available for public use. The majority of the sites, for one reason or another, were unresponsive to the surveys.

Nine sites, however, provided information relevant to the resources available at their site, including programs offered. Of the nine returned surveys:
> 3 centers indicated they served more than sixty residents a week
> 6 centers advertise their available resources in at least one way
> 4 centers offer technology training programs at their site

Many sites expressed interest in sharing resources. When asked, "*What would you like to see Operation Weed and Seed add to community technology partnerships within the community?*," two sites responded as follows:

> *We purchased a laptop and projector with Weed and Seed funds to*
> *be shared among groups as a loaner. I think a lending program*
> *for technology equipment should be maintained and expanded.*

> -

> *Network the partnerships. Teach us some marketing skills.*

The latter comment was made by a site that already produces flyers for advertising available resources showing a clear desire to expand the center's community reach. Additionally, pooled community reach and collaboration could help solve two other problems. First, of all Community Technology Partners not offering education training at this time, most said they did not offer training because of a lack of interest while the remainder stated that they did not feel competent enough to offer training. Second, all centers offering training offer basic skills classes creating a duplication of programs at different sites. Pooled community reach would allow centers with underutilized resources to more effectively make their resources and offerings available to the community by expanding awareness. Collaboration could help limit or eliminate redundant programs in neighboring communities paving the way for new programs or timeslots.

With the information stated above and other information contained in the surveys, Weed and Seed can make more focused investments in problem areas and instruct new sites more

effectively. Additionally, the gaps in knowledge and resources outlined by the survey results will help Operation Weed and Seed to structure future RFP's to anticipate these gaps. Having up to date information on community technology investments is a sustainable outcome if Weed and Seed establishes a regular method of communication with its Community Technology Partners. The second work task helps address the problem of a regular method of communication.

<u>Recommendation – Maintain Current List of Community Technology Partners</u>

It is my recommendation that each Community Technology Partner be required to have regular communication with Weed and Seed to keep contact information and the status of each site up to date. Monthly reports to local Weed and Seed steering committees would be effective, as would e-mail replies to a standardized form of questions. This would enable Operation Weed and Seed to maintain an up to date list of current sites and their resources. This list would then be advertised to the communities to provide more exposure for these resources, and would also be used in evaluating program successes.

While the onus for the compilation and maintenance of this list could be placed on the steering committee, it is important that the list is maintained even if the steering committee is unsuccessful. The best way to do this is to maintain frequent communication with Community Technology Partners to keep abreast of site changes. The incentive provided to the sites to keep Weed and Seed up to date on changes is the additional advertising they will receive through Weed and Seed. Guidelines for the sites should be left to the steering committee, but the maintenance of basic contact information is an imperative.

<u>Resources</u>

http://www.ctcnet.org/   Refer to this website for guides on evaluating community technology centers to get ideas for what questions to ask for status updates and what type of information should be provided in a steering committee report.

<u>2. Create a Plan for Community Technology Partner Steering Committee</u>

No communication currently exists on a formal level between Weed and Seed staff and Community Technology Partners or between individual community technology centers. As revealed in the first consulting task, many sites stand to benefit from collaboration with Weed and Seed staff and other Community Technology Partners.

<u>Results</u>

Using the results of the first consulting task, a recommendation for a Community Technology Center Steering Committee was created. Priorities and goals for the new committee were outlined in the recommendation. Priorities included:
- Establishing a resource sharing program between Community Technology Partners
- Coordinating program schedules to provide optimal access to community members
- Sharing programmatic successes with other sites to instruct them how to achieve similar results at their own site
- Providing for advertisement of all classes and equipment made available through Community Technology Partners
- Developing a list of "best practices" for Community Technology Partners
- Producing a set of standards for Community Technology Partners on minimal operating conditions and levels of access

Facilitating a discussion between community partners will allow every center to learn from the successes and failures of other centers, and through that learning to discover some of the best ideas they could be using at their community center. Also, it will allow centers to identify opportunities to share resources which they do not have need of at all times, or to coordinate program offerings to achieve the greatest number of programs or times possible for their communities. This coordination also avoids the duplication of programs that are offered at other sites in the community unless that duplication was created to serve a large population of interested community members. Community Technology Partners could also use each other to expand the number of community members who know about the resources and programs available at other sites. The goals of the Community Technology Partners will be furthered through this expanded usage and more efficient allocation of resources.

The sustainability of the steering committee depends on the commitment to take the plan and implement it, on its success as a valuable addition to the Community Technology Partner program, and also on the level of community interest in supporting the committee. Operation Weed and Seed and the Community Technology Partners have both expressed interest in participating in the committee during interviews, indicating that the committee will be supported. All that remains is for Operation Weed and Seed to develop that interest into an effective catalyst for change. The sustainability of the committee will therefore rest on its perceived success in adding to the Community Technology Partner program.

<u>Recommendation</u>

One of the most often referenced needs of Community Technology Partners is the need for Technical Support. Out of all sites interviewed in the course of the consulting work, only one did not mention the need for additional technical support. Weed and Seed could help provide for this need and in so doing further the goals of the technology centers by: improving the individual

proficiencies of Community Technology Partners receiving support, enabling a higher rate of available computers by fixing critical problems faster, and ensuring that the support exists to help Community Technology Partners keep their computers up to date. Additionally, the logging of technical support requests will be another source of information on the status of Community Technology Partners.

One possible solution to this need would be to contract a full time technical specialist whose job it would be to attend to all requests from Community Technology Partners. This person would be called on to support a variety of technology needs with Community Technology Partner sites: technology planning, project implementation, training, and support. The type of person who specializes in non-profit work for multiple organizations is called a "Circuit Rider." The desired background for this individual would be strongly rooted in other non-profit work of different types. It's important to have someone with a breadth of skills in a Circuit Rider position to ensure that they have a lot to offer the technology sites.

There are several feasible methods of hiring a suitable consultant. The specialist could be funded by Weed and Seed, in which case all expenses would be covered by Weed and Seed. The specialist could be funded by the Community Technology Partner Steering Committee or a smaller coalition of organizations, so that costs would be distributed across the organizations that stand to benefit most from the consultant. Additionally, one organization could step forward and take care of the hiring of a consultant, and simply lease out the services to other interested organizations, ensuring a fair distribution of costs and benefits. The last option is to find another suitable community investment organization interested in improving the technical literacy and efficiency of community sites to fund the consultant.

Management of the consultant could be handled independently of the hiring. While it could rest with the hiring agent, management of the consultant might best rest with the steering committee. In the case in which Weed and Seed or another community investment organization handles the hiring, management should probably rest with the steering committee to take the burden off of the investing organizations, and to enable the steering committee to dictate the usage of community resources.

Resources

http://www.techsoup.org/   TechSoup is an excellent website for answering technical questions relating to nonprofit organizations. This will be the best resource for further information on Circuit Riders. Just type in "Circuit Riders" into the search box and click search and many articles will be displayed that can be browsed for more information on the subject.

http://www.ctcnet.org/   CTC Net is an excellent website which contains materials for starting up new technology centers, evaluating current centers' programs, resources or sustainability, and also provides sample

forms used in the day to day operation of community technology centers. In addition, it contains information on collaboration and on the hiring of consultants. This is a resource that all Community Technology Partners should be aware of.

III. Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Expand Impact of Community Technology Partners

The consultant recommends that Weed and Seed establish a website to enable a new method for communication between Community Technology Partners and Weed and Seed and Community Technology Partners and each other.

Rationale

No forum is currently available for group discussions between Community Technology Partners and Weed and Seed staff, or between individual Community Technology Partners. This limits the amount of collaboration that can be done between Community Technology Partners, and makes it difficult for sites to discuss matters of mutual importance. The potential exists for Community Technology Partners to achieve greater impact in the community than they currently do through increased community reach and coordination. Some of this burden is relieved by the establishment of a steering committee, but a forum for inter-community discussion accomplishes several of Weed and Seed's goals at once.

By encouraging the casual use of Internet communication through a community discussion board Operation Weed and Seed helps train community members in everyday computer skills. Additionally, fostering discussion between communities on topics that both the community and the government can discuss on a casual level enables a greater understanding of community issues by both parties. Advertising the existence of Community Technology Partners and the actions and events of their associated organizations promotes greater community reach of both the centers and their host organizations. All of the above expand the current impact of Community Technology Partners without requiring any further substantial investment.

The recommended site to use is the Carnegie Mellon Community Connections program, and the contact information can be found in the resources below. The website provides for three different methods of communication: a web based community discussion board, a library tool that can store public materials for distribution, and a survey tool to poll users. Additionally, the website can be tailored to Weed and Seed's needs with a personalized front page and URL.

This website is recommended because the maintenance and updates will be handled by the Community Connections staff and because it currently networks other community sites. If the

site were hosted with Operation Weed and Seed, then the maintenance and upkeep of a sophisticated web application would fall to the current technology staff who do not have the resources to support an application of this scope. Also, other community organizations including Highland Park, Pittsburgh 21, and Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh currently utilize the webpage and more organizations are currently discussing joining. Having the website on this forum provides even greater exposure to Weed and Seed and its funded organizations.

<u>Resources</u>

Contact:	Description
Kim Falk-MacArthur 412.268.6953 kf3@andrew.cmu.edu	Kim Falk-MacArthur is the current Project Coordinator of the Community Connections project, and is the first person to talk to for setting up a website.
http://communityconnections.heinz.cmu.edu/	This is the URL for the Community Connections website.

About the Consultant:

Michael Olson is a junior in the Business Administration department of the School of Industrial Administration. He will be graduating next May with a B.S. in Business Administration with a double major in Computer Science. Future plans include professional consulting work and the completion of a Masters in Business Administration.