

Empowerment For Healthy Minds' Computer Empowerment Program

- What is your organization's mission? Its charitable purpose?

The mission of Empowerment for Healthy Minds is to foster the process of empowerment and to enhance wellness for the mental health consumer through education, mutual support, advocacy, and employment. Empowerment for Healthy Minds encourages the consumer to take an active role in a) achieving self-determination, b) realizing representation in organizations and in society, and c) attaining an identity worthy of esteem.

- What is CEP?

Education: The Computer Empowerment Program (CEP) trains mentally challenged individuals in computer skills and mental health advocacy.

In October, 2001, Dr. Marcus Cowgill with help from Dr. Terry Grimes designed and implemented a program called "Computer Empowerment," a new method of enhancing the lives of individuals who have been diagnosed with a psychiatric illness. Computer Empowerment involves 1-on-1 computer and advocacy training, and is considered a mentoring approach, in that rather than putting individuals through a typical computer instruction curriculum, mentor and pupil work together in planning a custom-tailored course of study aimed at maximizing personal growth and feelings of autonomy. A key concept is mutuality, the metaphor employed being "two individuals walking down a path together."

Common areas of interest for mental health consumers, with respect to computer technology, include Internet capability and learning ways to access information, particularly mental health information, email-related skills, office and work-related training, entertainment, and understanding and using Linux, a freely available alternative to Microsoft Windows.

The average mental health consumer struggles a great deal in achieving a degree of mastery over his or her life circumstance. The symptoms of one's illness can pose a great barrier, but co-occurring life circumstances often seem to limit one's potential the most. For example, most mental health consumers are poor and unemployed. Most cannot afford to buy a computer or even obtain the transportation necessary to use computers available at the library. As today's society grows ever more technological and "on-line," these people are being left out, stranded, in sense, and cut off from the knowledge resources so critical to becoming a full participant in the practical affairs of living.

Mentally challenged people have a deep sense of powerlessness. Often they don't understand their condition, are ignorant of the available approaches to treat their condition, and don't have enough skills to compete successfully in the workforce. They scrape by month to month on government disability payments, and can be found spending countless hours chain-smoking and staring at a TV.

Computer Empowerment tries to give an individual the sense that he or she is not

relegated to a bleak existence, but can grow, can learn, and can reach a more full and satisfying manner of being through his or her consistent effort. Computers serve a wonderful vehicle for this transformation, in that as one gains mastery in the complex and challenging world of computers, one begins to realize our ability to change life for the better. Over the past three years, CEP has touched a number of people in this fundamental way.

Some pupils need only a handful of sessions before feeling comfortable in pursuing computer understanding on their own. Others have pursued advanced topics such as Linux-based office computing, requiring more extended instruction. If an individual lacks a computer, a suitable computer will be provided. Marcus, the current CEP mentor, is able to empower in a wide range of areas, due to his background as a computer scientist, industrial psychologist, artist, and mental health advocate.

- How does CEP relate to your organization's overall purpose?

Empowerment For Healthy Minds achieves its mission when a person blossoms in attaining mastery in the world of computer usage, connected with vital sources of information as well as the rich community of similar "mental people" across the globe.

- What partnerships, cooperative efforts or collaborations are involved in this project?

Though not formally affiliated with other organizations, Empowerment For Healthy Minds works closely with community leaders in reaching its goals. The local Community Services Board, for example, often refers individuals to the CEP program. Additionally donations of money and computer equipment have come from a variety of sources, including our local Mental Health Association, the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), and local businesses such PC Land.

- What are your major goals for this project?

With additional funding we hope to touch more lives through direct, 1-on-1 Computer Empowerment training. We want every pupil to realize their potential in life to the maximum possible degree, building towards the day when people with mental illness engage fully in society and feel good about themselves--"worthy of esteem" as expressed in our mission statement. We also hope to spread word of CEP to those who may undertake similar projects in other regions of the country and other parts of the world. Our Empowerment For Healthy Minds website <http://www.EFHM.com> has had an impact on people as far away as the Great Britain, gaining us friendship and support for our work in a broad and effective way.