

PCs

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PC4P, as the team calls itself, launched the local branch in October 2020 and Poe was hired in January 2021 as the operations manager. He was promoted to managing director in mid-August. He left a 20-year construction management career before working three years for an anonymous family foundation. He was heavily involved in renovation projects for nonprofits. It was good training for what was to come.

“When I heard about this position, what really intrigued me was how it never occurred to me how computers are a basic need,” said Poe, a St. Louis native and resident.

The national PCs for People organization has been around since 1998, established in St. Paul, Minn. Even then, the founder, Andrew Elofson, realized there was a digital divide that holds back the progress of people who have no access to a computer or to broadband service. A branch was begun in Denver five years later, and now there are seven in all. In Illinois, there is also a branch in Cook County.

In Belleville, the branch’s growth took off during the pandemic when people with computer needs started reaching out for help, Poe said.

As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, every project, program and initiative at PCs for People is centered around low-cost computers and lesser-income individuals who need them.

Locally, the agency got a major boost with receipt of a \$1.4 million grant from Chicago Community Trust. That allowed money to be put toward purchase of the building in Belleville and commitment to a long-term presence, Poe said. But the grant is set to expire in March, making PC4P’s mission of self-sustainability much more important. Its revenue streams include money brought in from retail sales, recycling and event pricing.

The goal is to get computers into people’s hands for as little as possible.

“You and I know that a desktop computer that’s \$80, with a monitor and keyboard pack, is a good deal compared to going out and buying a new one,” Poe said. “But if you’ve done any work with underserved communities, you know that is still a big ask. Unfortunately, that’s kind of a break-even point for us.”

The grant helps subsidize that price. Most clients pay no more than \$40 for the package, he said.

Some 786 computers were given out for free, along with turkeys, during an event co-sponsored with the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis at the Casino Queen in November.

Urban League is one of three partners in administration of the grant. The other two are Leadership Council of Southwestern Illinois and Girl Scouts of Southern Illinois.

Each agency has played a crucial role in the past year-plus. Urban League is



PCs for People team members work a computer distribution in Fairmont City, in partnership with the Fairmont City Library. From left standing: Raffi Mikaelian (account manager), Kevin Poe (managing director) and Marquitta Morgan. Seated, Jennifer Reeves.

helping establish a workforce development program. Girl Scouts are helping with events and making inroads with local schools. Leadership Council helps with a network of contacts throughout Metro East, linking to businesses and individuals wanting to jettison their old equipment.

“When companies cycle out their computer equipment to upgrade, we would like them to donate to us, as opposed to a standard recycler. We’re going to refurbish it and get it back, discounted, into the hands of a low-income families,” Poe said. “We also sell to nonprofits, because we understand they are on a budget, like us.”

Computers can be obtained at the Belleville location, but so far most of the transactions have come at prearranged events while the agency builds awareness. Poe has been involved in, or in planning, events throughout Southern Illinois.

PC4P requires photo identification and income documentation for program qualification. Participants need either proof of current enrollment in an income-based government assistance program or documentation showing current income under 200 percent of the federal poverty level, relative to household size.

Fourteen people work out of the Belleville facility, which on big days is a flurry of activity. Computers are brought into the warehouse under a system that stresses legal and privacy obligations. Donations are kept in a locked area until hard drives can be removed. Any trace of the original owner is scraped away.

PC4P is certified by the National Association of Information Destruction, which requires the agency be ultra-careful about the contents of donated equipment. Anyone who has access to a hard drive must go through a criminal background check to work there.

During pickups, a secure, 26-foot box truck is used. From that point, the goods are in the “care and custody” of PC4P. Computers are stored inside a gated area inside the warehouse until the hard drives have been removed and rendered inaccessible, either by being wiped clean or shredded.

Some clients pull the hard drives before donating them, said Poe, who has granted tours to people to help make them comfortable about the process.

The leftover computer shells and their components are tested and split into bins where they either head to the rebuilding crews or to the recycler. The warehouse is a picture of neatly divided and various-sized monitors, power cords, VGA graphic connectors, routers, keyboards, motherboards, batteries, fax machines and printers.

Each refurbished computer is loaded with Windows 10. Computers with higher processing capability

will also get Microsoft programming. At a minimum, each computer would allow a user access for schooling, Zoom calls or to apply for jobs.

“You get a keyboard pack, monitor and computer ... and instructions on how to put it all together,” Poe said.

On a perfect day, about 75 to 100 computers could get overhauled.

“Since we’ve been here, we’ve distributed over 4,000 computers, which impacts more than 10,000 people if you consider people in a household,” he said. He said nearly 6,500 computers were going to be completed by the end of 2021.

If he could wave a magic wand, Poe said he would bolster connectivity. Broadband service is still unavailable for many people in rural regions and for those in Black and Brown communities.

He has been working with Fairmont City and its library recently on a unique solution. PC4P will buy a Wi-Fi hot spot from internet provider Mobile Beacon and offer service to the community, where language and income are both barriers.

“We can sell you our device, our hot spot for \$15 a month and we become the provider. It becomes an affordable option,” Poe said.

Many companies offer internet service, “but available internet vs. affordable internet is a whole other thing,” he said.

Out-of-the box thinking, a commitment to installing the infrastructure by private companies, and federal investment in infrastructure are all needed to address the situation, he said.

“It’s the digital divide, that’s the catchword. This effort does no good unless we can connect to the internet. You’re talking truly life-changing opportunity,” he said. “That’s what is cool about it for me.”

For more information visit <https://www.pcsforpeople.org/metroeast/>



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