

PC 4 Me

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PC 4 Me is a program originated and implemented by the City of Johnson City's Green Team. The program consists of utilizing certain components of the City's e-waste recycling program, rebuilding those components while adding necessary new ones, and placing working computer systems back in the community to deserving school-age children.

Johnson City is located in the northeast corner of Tennessee. With a population of approximately 62,000, Johnson City serves as the center of a metropolitan area of almost 500,000 people. Led by a forward-thinking council-manager form of government, the City of Johnson City is known for its innovative programs and service delivery.

On February 27, 1989, Johnson City implemented the state's first full-scale curbside recycling program. Since that snowy day nearly 22 years ago, the City has added other recycling services such as five drop-off sites, an office paper program, and a commercial cardboard program. With these programs still growing in popularity, over 172 million pounds of recyclables have been collected and sold. In October 2006, the City added e-waste to its long list of acceptable recycling items. More than 427,000 pounds of e-waste have been collected and sold to date – that's 23 tractor-trailer loads that were diverted from the area landfill.

Numerous types of e-waste are accepted, but computers and associated components make up the greatest bulk of e-waste. After observing hundreds of computers coming through the City's recycling processing facility, Solid Waste Services Manager John Smith knew the City could make better use of the materials. After considerable brainstorming with the City's Green Team, the group decided to take computers, make them usable again, and return them to the community for use. In January 2010, PC 4 Me was born.

PC 4 Me is a collaborative effort between the City's Solid Waste Services Division, the City's Information Technology Department, and local computer supply retailers. Computers are selected from the e-waste inventory, refurbished with new hardware and loaded with age-appropriate software such as Microsoft Word and Excel and the Encyclopedia Britannica. Antivirus software is installed, and all PCs are made Internet-ready. A flat-screen monitor, keyboard and mouse – all from the e-waste stream – also are provided. Solid Waste Services provides a new printer with each system, while area businesses donate one year's supply of paper and ink.

Johnson City has eight elementary schools and one middle school within its corporate boundaries. The Green Team decided that one complete computer system would be awarded to one fifth grader in each of the elementary schools while two sixth and seventh graders from the middle school each would receive a system.

In order to be eligible for a computer system, the student could not already have a working computer in his or her home. Interested students were asked to write a 100-word essay on "Why I Want a Computer." The submissions were reviewed and ranked by Green Team volunteers. Essays with the greatest amount of first-place votes from each school then were selected to receive a complete computer system.

During November 2010, the 12 winning students were presented with their systems by Mayor Jane M. Myron at the regularly scheduled meeting of the Johnson City Board of Commissioners. Because each Commission meeting is televised, citizens throughout Johnson City were able to watch this special presentation. This was not, however, the first time the children had been notified that they had won. At least one winning student already had been told of his success in front of an audience. The following is an excerpt from a letter sent by a local principal:

"I just wanted to let you know that our South Side 5th grader was absolutely thrilled about winning the computer. His mom was ecstatic, and came to school to tell him, so we announced it in front of the whole 5th grade. Cyrus started crying he was so excited. He is a great kid whose whole family really struggles financially and he would never get a computer without this program. Thank you so much for doing this. You have made one special 5th grader feel like he's won the lottery."

Cyrus is a perfect example of the difference PC 4 Me has made in the lives of kids in our community. His essay explained that his mother does not work and his father is in school. He and his father both had to go to friends' houses to do homework on their computers. Cyrus also has younger siblings who he wanted to have access to a computer. "A new computer would make a big difference for my whole family," he wrote.

PC 4 Me does not just affect the children who win these computer systems but their entire families. If the City can continue this program each year, our impact on the community –

particularly those residents who need it most – will be immeasurable. Future plans for PC 4 Me include adding nonprofit agencies that serve school-age children to our list of recipients.

The only cost other than staff time that the City incurred with the PC 4 Me program was the cost of the new printers at \$40 each, for a total of \$480. All other needs were met by generous donations from businesses that saw the benefit of this program and were eager to be involved. PC 4 Me is an wonderful representation of how City departments work together for the good of our community and is also a great example of how public-private partnerships can help our citizens. This program is impactful in so many ways – materials are kept from the waste stream, made useful again, and benefit families who are truly in need – all because of a visionary idea and the collaborative spirit that has seen it through.