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Illustration by Matthew Bouchard

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"People give homeless shelters computers, but nobody works on developing software for those computers. Great, you have a computer, now go to AOL and Monster.com," says Melanie Lavelle, a project coordinator at the Women's Center for Education and Career Advancement, a not-for-profit social services agency for low-income women in New York, NY. Until recently, the only specialized software at agencies like the Women's Center were database applications, which allowed social workers to keep track of clients. Two years ago, Lavelle and her six coworkers shared one AOL account, and had no specialized software. But now, she says, "stuff is popping up every day."

At the Women's Center, Lavelle oversaw the development of a Web-based application that helps low-income workers determine their qualification for certain benefit packages. Called the Self-Sufficiency Calculator, the Java-based program enables users to enter information about their income, family size, and other personal details, and compare that information against eligibility requirements for a dozen state and federal assistance programs, including housing assistance, food stamps, and Medicare.

Most of these assistance programs don't let people apply online, Lavelle explains. "Clients find out about them by word of mouth, and then must go door to door, during their work hours, to find out if they're even eligible." A 2001 report from the General Accounting Office, Congress's investigative agency, found that an average family must visit six separate offices just to apply for the largest 11 federally-funded assistance programs.

A review of 31 Web-based work-support applications, published in May by the Brookings Institution, a public policy think tank based in Washington, D.C., concluded that "public agencies—working with private entities, community-based agencies and employers—can use web-enabled information technology to dramatically expand the reach and effectiveness of work support programs for low-income working families."

Although most of the applications were developed by not-for-profit agencies through grants (the Women's Center's Self-Sufficiency Calculator was funded by the United Way of New York), a few for-profit companies have also joined the effort. Peter Martin Associates, a software firm based in Chicago, IL,

Welfare Software

By Alan Leo October 18, 2002

Access to computers alone won't help the working poor, experts say. The missing piece? Software.

Philanthropists, not-for-profit groups, and government agencies continue to spend millions improving public access to computers—the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation alone has installed more than 30,000 computers in public libraries, with the goal of adding another 11,000 by 2005. But a growing number of social service agencies say software, not hardware, is the technology most sorely needed by Americans on the wrong side of the so-called digital divide, and a growing number of companies and universities are responding.

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makes HelpWorks, a software package for human services workers that not only calculates benefits eligibility, but also guides client interviews and recommends appropriate services, such as health care and counseling.

"Foundations should have in their mind," says Lavelle, "that technology isn't just computers. It's all around." But for low-income Americans to reap the full benefit of new technology, the agencies that seek to help them must ford another kind of digital divide: the one that has traditionally separated the human services and high-tech communities.

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Alan Leo is an associate editor at Technology Review.



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