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Expanded local computer lab hopes to attract more users

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BARSTOW • More Barstow residents will soon have access to high-speed Internet and a full-time staff to help them search for jobs, build resumes and access other online resources.

The Housing Authority of the County of San Bernardino is adding five Mac computers and high-speed Internet to its Barstow computer lab at 932 Lassen Court. Staff will offer computer classes and training sessions to public housing residents and the general public. Hours will be expanded as well, said Ana Gamiz, an agency spokesperson. Gamiz couldn't say what the new hours would be, but said the lab will be open on evenings and weekends.

"We're going to do a lot more outreach so it's really a resource for the entire community," she said. "We can just imagine that even if someone could afford the Internet, it's probably a luxury."

A \$1.2 million federal stimulus grant is enabling the Housing Authority to expand computer labs at public housing sites in Colton, Redlands, San Bernardino and Barstow. In addition to the \$1.2

million grant, the City of San Bernardino Employment and Training Agency provided a \$300,000 match for the expanded labs. The Housing Authority spent \$200,000 for the computer labs.

It could take about 60 days for the Housing Authority to install the additional computers and hire the people who will staff the labs, Gamiz said. The Housing Authority will meet next week for a planning session to decide what computer classes and resources will be provided and how the general public can take advantage of them, she said.

The lab currently has 10 Personal Computers and is open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. According to Program Coordinator Matthew White, who staffs the Barstow lab, it's hard for kids to be able to use the computer lab because it's closed by 3 p.m.

"The more we can do the better," he said.

The Housing Authority isn't alone in wanting to open a computer lab to the public. Barstow's plans for the refurbished Al Vigil Swim Center also include a 15-unit computer lab. Community Services Director Jeanette Hayhurst said she wasn't familiar with the Housing Authority's plans to expand its computer lab, but she doesn't think it will conflict with the city's concepts. City officials decided to add a computer lab because the community asked for it, she said.

"The community asked for it and we will respond to that," she said. "Let's face it, a huge percentage of homes have PCs. It is the communication method of our era, so we need to be sure people are ready to use it and communicate with it."

The city is currently seeking a \$5 million state parks grant for the project. City officials will find out if Barstow received the grant this summer. A tentative completion date for the project is the end of 2012 or the beginning of 2013.

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