

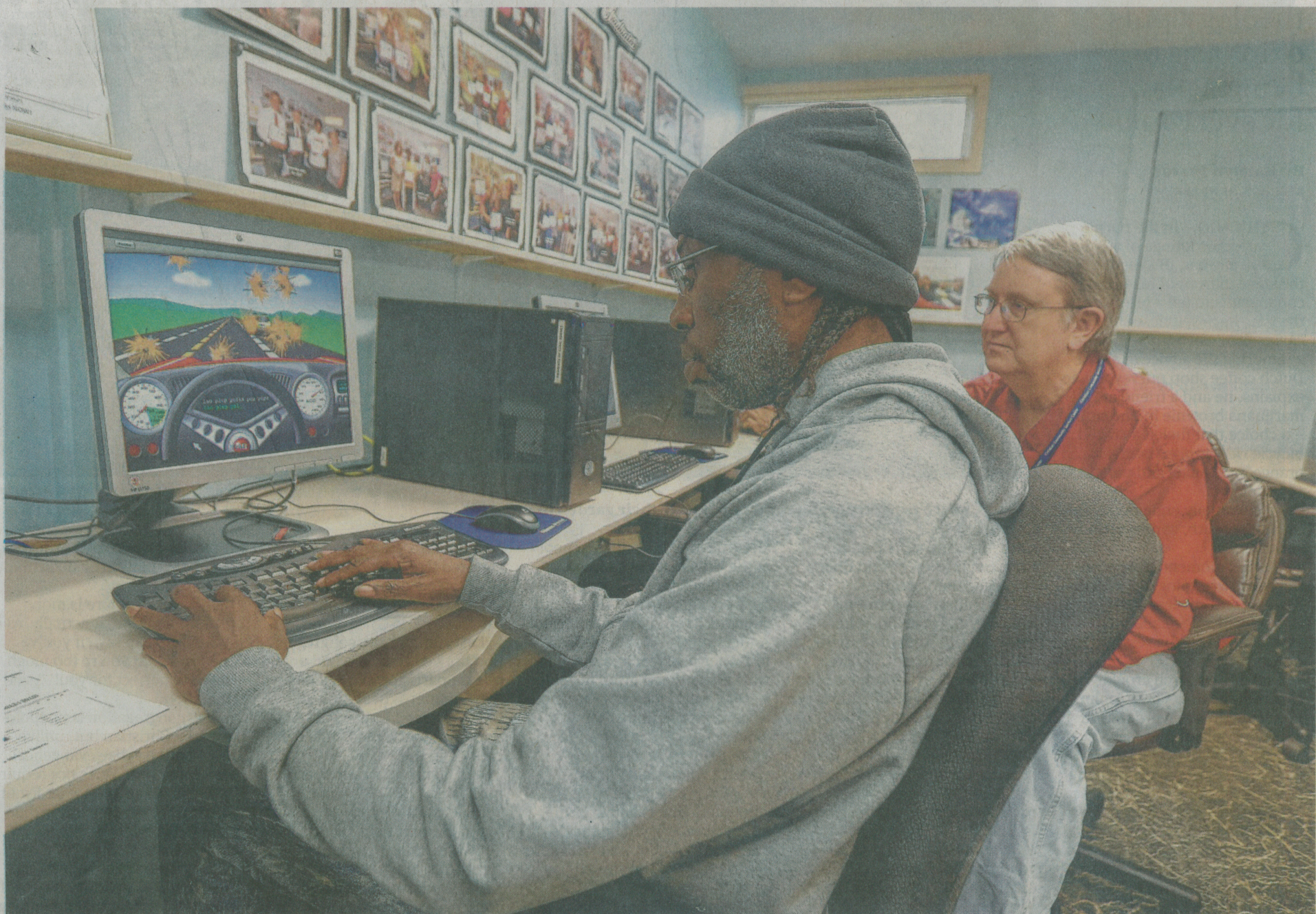
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Section F ★★

WORKING TOGETHER



Photos by Steve Gonzales / Staff photographer

Christian Community Service Center client Kevin Leacy, left, works on his computer skills with the help of Robert McMahan in the employment services program.

Agency seeks to help people in any way they might need

By Aaron West
CORRESPONDENT

After Sonia Tate was laid off from her job at a credit-card processing company in 2017, her life became a lot more uncertain.

As the unemployed weeks of rejected job applications grew into months, nerve-wracking questions kept her up at night: Would she be able to find a new job? How long would her savings last? How would she be able to support her family if they needed help?

"It was horrible," she said. "Just the not knowing what you are going to do. I was really taken aback at how bad

Christian Community Service Center provides everything from food and basic needs to job services



Volunteer Jones Bowman stocks toothpaste in the Christian Community Service Center food pantry.

it got, I was like 'What is going on?'"

She would visit staffing agencies to look for job opportunities, but what she really needed was a way to spruce up her résumé. So when she heard about the Christian Community Service Center's JobNet program at one of the agencies, she decided to check it out. The program offers resources like mock interviews and classes that teach communication skills and résumé writing.

"I didn't know what it was going to be, but I was at the end of my options honestly," Tate, 49, said.

The center, which helps people in situations like Tate's every week, helped her get a

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job in less than a month. The Christian Community Service Center is a multipurpose, faith-based nonprofit organization – started in 1980 by several local churches – that aims to help people in any way they might need.

“Our faith propels us to help people,” said Michelle Shonbeck, the center’s executive director. “There are a lot of people who need it.”

Indeed, the center, which along with employment and job services, also offers basic need assistance – food, clothes, financial help – and organizes campaigns to get schoolchildren food and school supplies. It served more than 20,000 people last year, according to data the organization keeps. That’s more than 10,000 people who were provided food or some other basic need, 10,825 schoolchildren who were helped by one of the center’s youth services and more than 600 people helped with unemployment needs like Tate.

People generally find out about the service center through word of mouth and referrals from other

agencies and organizations because of how successful it is with giving them the customized assistance they need, Shonbeck said.

“We listen to people’s stories and determine how we can help them,” she said. “If we can’t give them what they need, then we can connect them to somewhere that can.”

On a recent Monday, volunteers working at the center were doing just that in one of the several counseling pods where potential clients explain to counselors what they’re looking for. Nearby, in a room stocked with shelves of canned food and other groceries, two volunteers were loading the food into paper bags to be handed out. A staff member sat at a ringing telephone next to a big map of Houston, with all the city’s ZIP codes pasted on it.

“We serve specific geographic areas of Houston to prevent overlap with other service organizations,” Shonbeck said, adding that anyone inside Loop 610 was eligible to be helped.

Across the parking lot is the JobNet headquarters, where the walls are decorated with stars that have the names of people who the center has helped to find a job. The program is part of an ongoing evolution at the center,



Steve Gonzales / Staff photographer

Christian Community Service Center volunteer Bill Cobb leads a class in résumé writing.

Shonbeck said.

When Christian Community Service Center started, it was focused solely on helping people with food and clothes. But over the following years, it became clear people were coming in with more specific needs.

“We would see people coming through that needed help with budgeting, or setting up bank accounts, or achieving job-related goals,” she said. “So we adapted.”

The program is still evolving, too.

Its newest iteration, a program

called Martha’s Way, started in the early 2000s as a replica of JobNet, just in a different part of the city, Shonbeck explained. But after speaking with community leaders, the nonprofit decided to shift its goals to better address the area’s needs. Now, instead of offering the employment services that JobNet provides, Martha’s Way helps people, mostly women, set up small housecleaning businesses.

“It’s a 42-hour entrepreneurial program that teaches people about owning a business,” she

said. “Some women can work full time, others want a more flexible schedule. Having a housecleaning business allows you to do that.”

And meanwhile, JobNet is still functioning alongside the new program. That’s what Doug Graham, a former client at the center, has turned to while he looks for a new job in health care administration.

After Graham was laid off last year, he learned about the service center through the church he attends. Since he hadn’t had much luck with interviews, he decided to tap into the mock interview service the center provides. The service put him face to face with a former hiring manager, now a volunteer, who gave Graham pointers on how to improve his interviewing techniques.

“He helped me prepare some anecdotes to tell and filled me in on a few questions that I hadn’t really considered I might be asked,” said Graham, who interviewed for a new job last month and is waiting to hear back. “I’m feeling pretty positive about my chances.”

Aaron West is a writer based in Houston.