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Seniors become more tech savvy

BY LAURA MORALES

When 94-year-old Zoila Arévalo decided to get with the cyber program, she used an old, borrowed computer. When she told relatives she wanted a computer of her own, her grandchildren laughed.

"Grandma, no, you're going to break it," Arévalo said, quoting them.

Arévalo didn't get a computer, but she still has access to new machines, thanks to eSeniors, a program from the city of Miami and Microsoft, which stocks local senior centers with new computers, including hardware and software meant to simplify the online experience for folks who are a bit technology-shy.

eSeniors is part of Elevate Miami, a city program geared at increasing access to computers and technology for all residents.

"There's a serious commitment on my part to make sure that every resident of Miami can be connected to the rest of the world," Diaz said Monday during a kick-off press conference in the Senior Center at Gesu Catholic Church, 118 NE Second St. "Thousands of kids and parents already use the Internet in our parks."

Recent data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project show that about 32 percent of those above 65 years old use the Internet.

The program at Gesu started small, with five machines, in August. "We wanted to see what would happen first," said the Rev. Eduardo Alvarez, the church's pastor. "We ended up with long lines of seniors waiting to use them. We added 10 more computers."

After the conference, the assembled group piled into the church's computer lab, where some of the oldsters, giggling like children, showed off new skills by logging in to their e-mail accounts.

Through a \$600,000 donation of equipment and software, including new Microsoft computer/peripheral packages tailored specifically for seniors, the city has set up its first two eSeniors locations, at Gesu and at the Jack Orr Senior Center, 550 NW Fifth St.

Maria Wynne, a Microsoft marketing officer, said the company will continue its partnership with the city, aiming to have 13 eSeniors centers open by this time next year.

Nery and Nestor Olivier, 82 and 80, take a bus to Gesu every day to indulge their newfound passion for computers, which help them stay in touch with family in Cuba. "When you receive help like this, you have to thank God," Nery said.

Arévalo shared her joy at finding a new skill. "At our age, we still have dreams and ideas we want to share. Loneliness is hard. But this helps make it easier," she said. For more information on eSeniors, call 305-416-1550 or visit www.elevatemiami.com.