

Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: Future Generations Graduate School

Project Title: Equipping West Virginia's Fire and Rescue Squads with Technology and Training to Serve Communities

Project Type: Sustainable Adoption

Executive Summary

BARRIERS TO BROADBAND ADOPTION

Broadband is available to an estimated 77% of households in West Virginia, but is underutilized. The state's 40% broadband subscription rate is significantly lower than the national subscription rate of 63% due to barriers including a low income, lack of household computers, and a perceived lack of usefulness for both computers and broadband. As one Fire Chief noted during a Future Generations survey: "I don't even know how to turn the thing on, much less how it can help me or my squad."

VOLUNTEER FIRE AND RESCUE SQUADS TO PROMOTE BROADBAND

This proposal offers a community-based solution to stimulate broadband adoption among low-income and predominantly rural communities across West Virginia. It will create a culture of use by extending computer access and relevant broadband training through West Virginia's most widespread de facto community centers—volunteer fire and emergency rescue stations.

These anchor institutions number 445 and are in nearly every community. They are rooted in communities, serve as life-links for West Virginia's families, and are logical centers for broadband learning and extension.

This proposal focuses on volunteer fire and rescue squads because: 1) they are the state's de-facto community centers; 2) 48% are already subscribed to broadband, but don't have the equipment and skills to put it to use; 3) 52% have accessible space for computers and training available to the public; 4) they have active volunteers who will provide the critical peer-to-peer support networks to stimulate and sustain the use of broadband in the home; and 5) these organizations have their own immediate computer and training needs, especially as training certifications become more professionalized and place more demand on volunteers.

A STATEWIDE EXTENSION STRATEGY

In year one, this proposal will begin with 30 fire and rescue stations that already have access to broadband. Letters of Collaboration from 22 squads in 11 low-income counties and an African-American minority population center have already been signed. In years two and three, larger statewide extension will occur at 45% of the prior cost by inviting an additional 60 volunteer fire and rescue squads to participate in available training programs and to take advantage of a computer equipment stipend that can be used to purchase low-cost refurbished computers. The computers to be refurbished will be provided by Mission WV; they will be repaired at the Circleville High School in Pendleton County and by a small disadvantaged business in Charleston.

To extend broadband into communities, fire and rescue squads will be equipped with 11 computer stations as well as a projector and screen, printer/scanner, and web camera/ microphone to enable real-time audio/video communication. Each volunteer fire and rescue squad agrees to: make their facilities available to the general public for a minimum of ten hours per week, select a local person to be trained as a computer mentor, and host training programs.

RELEVANT TRAINING AND PARTNERSHIPS

By engaging volunteer fire and rescue squads, this project creates new “community access points” for educational organizations and state training programs. Partner organizations, including state agencies, community and technical colleges, a major university, non-profit organizations, and online providers, have joined this project as instructors and online curriculum providers.

The curriculum includes: 1) digital literacy classes offered two nights a week by local computer mentors trained by this project, 2) a disaster preparedness course provided by the John Hopkins Public Health Preparedness Programs, 3) online computer mapping offered by the Monongahela National Forest, 4) health and wellness and substance abuse training for families offered by the Partnership of African American Churches, 5) an e-commerce academy offered by Mission WV, 6) an online career readiness course provided by KeyTrain as well as linkages with the state’s Workforce Investment Boards, and 7) an annual one-time stipend of \$1,000 that allows fire and rescue squads to enroll their members in the online courses of their choice offered by local community and technical colleges through Ed2go.com.

MARKETING AND PROMOTION STRATEGY

A parallel promotion strategy will include: 1) peer-to-peer outreach as news about the new broadband computer access and training spreads from home to home, 2) quarterly newspaper and radio ads announcing the new service, 3) aluminum signs on every participating fire station, 4) outreach to encourage participation among other local groups, and 5) a social networking and support website, www.futurewv.org.

COST-BENEFITS

This project uses conservative projections to estimate that of the 58,602 users (including 48,240 people trained), 16,614 will become new household and business subscribers. With a budget of \$7,683,411, the cost per subscription will be \$462; the cost per new end-user will be: \$131. And, up to 201,860 people will be informed. The project's research director will conduct surveys and monitor use to provide evidence of impact.

ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS

The Future Generations Graduate School specializes in community-based approaches to major social challenges and has an impressive track record managing complex international and educational programs that rely on broadband. The organization also has deep roots in WV. A sign of organizational readiness is evidence of the 22 local partners as well as instructors, businesses, and state agencies that have enthusiastically committed to this project.

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability will be achieved largely through the volunteer efforts of fire and rescue squads as their members and the communities they serve become enthused and empowered by the expanding opportunities of broadband.