

Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: Wireless Neighborhoods

Project Title: Pittsburgh CONNECTS

Project Type: Public Computer Center

Executive Summary

The Pittsburgh CONNECTS (Creating an Organized Neighborhood Network to Enhance Community Technology Services) model proposes to bring community organizations together with anchor institutions to open labs in four of the most vulnerable areas of Pittsburgh with the ultimate goal of increasing the adoption of broadband technology by providing access, education and training, and connections to web content and services.

THE NEED

Lack of access to technology, like academic underachievement, chronic health problems and limited job histories, is yet another yolk on the already callused shoulders of a disproportionate number of lower income urban residents.

Broadband Access: A 2007 study by the Pew Research Center indicated that income and education directly predict internet access. Individuals with incomes below \$40,000 and educational attainment at or below high school have the lowest rate of broadband use. The 2008 Scarborough study noted that Pittsburgh at 44% had one of the lowest broadband penetration rates of urban areas.

Academic Underachievement: In the past two school years, African American and lower income students at Pittsburgh Public Schools scored on average 35% lower than Caucasian students on PSSAs.

Health Issues: "Minorities and low income Americans are more likely to be sick and less likely to get the care they need," Secretary Sebelius said. "These disparities have plagued our health system and our country for too long" (News Release, 6/9/2009, HHS Press Office).

Poverty: A 2007 study conducted by the University of Pittsburgh pointed to a litany of troubling statistics for lower income and African Americans in the city of Pittsburgh including: significant disparities between African American and Caucasian employment and median income.

ADDRESSING THE NEED

Imagine a non-profit Starbucks outfitted with 40 broadband-connected laptops and furnished with comfortable sofas, chairs, and tables. In one corner, there is a coffee and juice bar operated by neighborhood youth, while at the opposite corner there is a training space equipped with a SMART Board. Lots of people are located around the center working on laptops. Now, picture this happening in an urban neighborhood marked by poor broadband penetration, struggling to break the cycles of poverty.

This submission proposes to: (1) Provide improved broadband access to consumers in underserved areas and (2) Provide broadband education, awareness, training, access, equipment, and support to community anchor institutions, job-creating strategic facilities, and vulnerable populations.

Partnership: Pittsburgh CONNECTS (PC) will bring together prominent community organizations and some of the city's strongest anchor institutions. Partners were selected based on their connection to the most vulnerable areas of the city.

Community Hubs: PC centers will be neighborhood-based. Residents will naturally flow to the locations where they and their families have, in many cases, gone for generations.

Coffee/Juice Bar: Youth workers, funded through Workforce Investment Act funds, will operate a coffee/juice bar.

Laptop Library: Residents will be able to use laptops at the centers. Members with advanced standing will be able to borrow laptops overnight.

Laptop Lease-to-Buy: Through a replenishing fund set up through this proposal, PC members will be able to buy laptops through PC's no interest Lease-to-Buy program.

State-of-the-Art Labs: Labs will have 36 laptops and 4 multimedia desktops connected to broadband; colorfully decorated spaces with tables, chairs, and couches; and a training space equipped with SMART Board.

Hours: 8AM-10PM Mon-Fri, 10AM-8PM Sat/Sun

Staffing: Each center will employ a lab manager to oversee operations and three lab assistants. A group of volunteers, subsidized youth workers, AARP volunteers, and college students will be recruited to support the extended lab hours. Two staff, a technology coordinator and a content specialist, will be shared across the four centers.

Training: Centers will provide an ever-changing, organic menu of training and education programs that address the needs of residents, anchor institutions and employers.

Content: PC already has an amazing set of partners with content. Moreover, Wireless Neighborhoods (WN) and its partners hold licenses for software that will be shared across the network.

TARGET POPULATION

PC labs will be available to all residents served by the four partner organizations. Most are African American, many live in poverty and struggle with employment, education and health problems. Each of the targeted communities has been plagued by generations of poverty.

END USERS & BENCHMARKS

16,000 unique end users receive services at the centers

8000 participate in training/education programs

2000 PC certified members (complete 40-hr training)

400 laptops purchased through Lease-to-Buy

ABILITY TO IMPLEMENT

WN was originally formed in the early 2000s as a voluntary alliance of community and faith organizations to explore ways technology could support community efforts to address education, employment and other challenges in Pittsburgh's lower income communities. Since 2004, WN has successfully managed a US DOE Community Technology Centers grant and three PA DOE 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants serving 1000s of children. Each project, as with PC, has multiple partners serving the city's lower income families.

JOBS SAVED/CREATED

WN and its partners have committed to hiring individuals from the participating neighborhoods to fill all staff positions, with special consideration given to individuals who are currently unemployed. The PC initiative will create eighteen jobs:

1 FT Technology Coordinator

1 FT Content Specialist

4 FT Lab Managers

12 PT Lab Assistants

OVERALL BUDGET

\$784,000 requested from NTIA funds + \$211,000 match = \$995,000 total