

Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: WinstonNet, Inc.

Project Title: WinstonNet Enhanced Community Computer Centers for Forsyth County

Project Type: Public Computer Center

Executive Summary

Free public access computer labs operate throughout Winston-Salem and Forsyth County, including labs located in census tracts that contain more than 60% of the county population with median household income under \$40,000. The free labs have been in operation since 2003 utilizing an innovative support model that relies on strong partnerships between local government, educational institutions, and community non-profit organizations. Even though utilization of the labs remains high, the goal of providing enhanced experiences to the underserved is at risk due to aged equipment and poor furnishings. Funding through the BTOP grant will be used to refresh the equipment and furnishings in order to substantially improve the quality and individual experience provided through these labs.

The computer labs are supported through WinstonNet, a non-profit organization comprised of City and County governments, four universities, a community college, the public school system, and the Chamber of Commerce. A portion of WinstonNet's membership fees pay for maintenance of the computer labs, and administrative oversight is through volunteer time. A majority of the labs are located in city recreation centers and public libraries. Partnerships with other non-profit organizations such as the YMCA, YWCA, churches, and organizations that serve special populations have enabled further expansion of the labs. All together there are 40 labs providing computer access to hundreds of residents every day.

WinstonNet labs utilize donated desktop computers that on average are 9.3 years old. The computers operate as thin-client terminals connected to servers over broadband connections. Private WinstonNet accounts are available to everyone for secure data storage and individual email. These computers were sufficient in this model when they were not as old and were used primarily for local desktop applications and general Internet browsing, vs. current demand for multimedia and Web 2.0 Internet services. Computer sessions are often interrupted when equipment breaks due to age, and are becoming more difficult to repair. In the past, donated used computers were readily available from member institutions that replaced desktop computers on a three year refresh cycle and declared the used equipment as surplus. Computers are now being kept longer by these organizations due to challenging economic times and are less likely to have much functional value when finally replaced.

It is proposed to replace the used desktop computers with new thin-client terminals specially designed for remote desktop services over the Internet. The proposed technology architecture is very similar to the current delivery model, offering similar features for reducing management overhead and enforcing a standard operating environment. In addition, the new thin-client technology has much better performance, supports current web technologies, and is less expensive to maintain. It will operate on existing servers and the existing network infrastructure with a new server for data storage purposes.

The computer labs are furnished with whatever tables and chairs that may have been available at the time. Grant funding will be used to replace these furnishings with basic computer tables that incorporate wiring and clean, simple chairs throughout the labs. New furnishings will positively affect the user experience, reduce hardware outages, and encourage a positive learning experience, as well as positive behavior. Labs that are regularly used as training classrooms will be equipped with electronic white-boards and/or mobile projectors. A group of mobile devices will be used to bring computer access to public facilities in rural areas on a rotating basis.

In 2006 WinstonNet partnered with Forsyth County to obtain a grant from the State of North Carolina to develop a computer training program in public libraries. Three years later the 'Computer Training Bridge' has become a permanent program funded by the County that provides free computer training throughout the WinstonNet computer labs. Courses are taught by trained volunteers, focusing on computer literacy, work skills, and use of the Internet for personal needs. Students include, but are not limited to, children, unemployed, elderly, and the disabled. In the past 12 month period, 891 separate courses were taught to 4,464 attendees. All computer labs provide handicapped access and a few labs have special hardware and software for the blind. Grant funds will be used to expand availability of special equipment and software for the physically disadvantaged, including support for a new lab within a non-profit organization focused on this special population.

WinstonNet labs provide computers and broadband Internet access to an entire community with focus on the underserved and disadvantaged populations. It has relied on a combination of volunteers, donated facilities and computers, and cash contributions for equipment maintenance and broadband services. This has proven to be a sustainable model for over six years, and continues to operate even through difficult financial times. The quality of the labs is now compromised and likely to become much worse if the equipment and furnishings are not soon replaced. WinstonNet is asking for a total of \$466,000 for equipment and furnishings to significantly enhance services and benefits. WinstonNet will contribute \$96,000 in cash during the 18 month project period, along with a tremendous amount of unclaimed in-kind assistance. WinstonNet and its partner's contributions for facilities, volunteer time,

the Computer Training Bridge program, network equipment, and administrative overhead will exceed at least \$1 million in in-kind assistance during the time to complete the proposed project.