

Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: District of Columbia Government

Project Title: DC Sustainable Broadband

Project Type: Sustainable Adoption

Executive Summary

Based on the District's analysis of the broadband penetration data submitted by carriers to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) on Form 477, the District has a citywide broadband adoption rate of 57.87 percent. This statistic masks the near-100 percent adoption rates in the more affluent parts of the District, as well as adoption rates below 40 percent in large lower income areas.

Digital literacy and broadband adoption can improve educational attainment and provide a helping hand out of poverty. In the District, entrenched poverty and low educational attainment are substantial problems. For example, the District of Columbia suffers from one of the lowest adult literacy rates in the country. According to The State of Adult Literacy report published by the D.C. State Education Agency in March 2007, 37 percent of the District's total adult population reads at the lowest levels of functional literacy. Although adults at this level are represented in all city wards, functionally illiterate adults are most likely to live in Wards 5, 7, and 8, with percentages close to 50 percent east of the Anacostia River. In 2002, the State Education Agency estimated that more than 130,000 adult residents (22 percent of the population) lacked a high school diploma or a General Equivalency Diploma (Washington Literacy Council Annual Report, 2007).

The District's unemployment rate, driven in part by residents' poverty and poor educational attainment, is abnormally high in certain communities. In May 2009, citywide unemployment was 10.7 percent, but as with other indicators, there was a wide disparity in unemployment across communities. In May 2008, before the recent economic downturn, the citywide unemployment figure was 6.6 percent, but in Wards 7 and 8 it was 11.2 and 17.2, respectively, as compared with 1.7 percent in Ward 3, the city's most affluent ward. With job creation and economic revitalization as a central premise of the BTOP program and the District's comprehensive set of projects, the District's SBA application accomplishes this daunting task using the approach that access to job training is the most sustainable use of project resources. With an above average unemployment rate (10.9 percent-June), the impact of the SBA projects will be significant. With over 30,000 residents unemployed and the concentration of this population within the service area of "underserved" communities; reaching this population, even at modest levels, should create opportunities for both training and employment of this population.

In a recent survey of participants in the District's Summer Youth Employment Program, respondents cited cost as the predominant reason that they had not adopted broadband in the home. In other

words, the cost of broadband service and/or a computer to access it was the main obstacle to household broadband adoption. Though this lack of adoption is partly addressed by the access and training aspects of the District's BTOP proposal for public computing centers, this Sustainable Broadband Adoption (SBA) proposal goes further, not only adding to access and training resources to bring the benefits of broadband to vulnerable populations, but also developing ongoing, innovative mechanisms to sustain and increase such broadband adoption.

The District's SBA proposal is designed to maintain long-term demand for broadband. The District's other BTOP projects—Infrastructure and Public Computing Centers (PCC)—are the means by which residents can access the tools and applications that this SBA proposal puts into place. Without full funding of the District's Infrastructure and Public Computing Center proposal the SBA project's would be severely impeded in its effort to provide broadband to its most underserved residents.

At the core of the District's SBA application is a new and innovative approach to the free public wireless mesh network. Though the District-owned portion of the network will be implemented via BTOP funding requested under the District's Infrastructure application, this SBA application includes creation of a non-profit administrator to leverage the District's infrastructure as well as that provided by other network participants, including corporate sponsors, small local businesses, and simple household participants in what will become a grass-roots, distributed ownership, organically growing network with an open-source, vendor-neutral architecture. The administrator will promote the network, maintain the splash page, establish and implement a localized advertising model, use the proceeds of such advertising to subsidize hardware and training and drive the network to areas where additional coverage or capacity is needed. It is this network that will enable the District's underserved and vulnerable populations to sustain the broadband usage they adopted in a training program, and because of its organic, open-source nature, they may be able to take partial ownership and grow the network by installing an inexpensive meshing access point of their own.

The District estimates that its SBA project will reach 130,905 households, 1,152 community anchor points and 291,919 residents of the underserved service area and up to 433,500 residents in total (both inside and outside of service area) for a total cost of \$10.5 million in federal funds and \$3.5 million in matching funds. The project will employ 15 employees and contractors directly as trainers at least 100 other contractors and support staff and assist at least 10,000 residents secure job training skills to gain employment.