

Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: Connect SI Foundation, Inc.

Project Title: Connect SI Content Development Team (CDT)

Project Type: Sustainable Adoption

Executive Summary

Connect SI is a collaborative, regional economic development strategy built upon the assets of the twenty southernmost counties of Illinois to assure the region shares a strong competitive economy enabled by robust broadband, a connected healthcare system fully articulated around a talent-laden workforce, and a growing resident population. As such, Connect SI proposes a Content Development Team (CDT), an innovative and sustainable approach to improve broadband service adoption rates in southern Illinois, enabling a greater and more productive use of broadband and the Internet.

Currently in southern Illinois, many organizations work independently from one another with marginal results in attempts to solve education or workforce development challenges. For example, both education and business organizations have parallel goals for excellence in education. Schools desire to offer enhanced educational content to enable student academic and professional achievement, yet K-12 organizations do not understand the importance or the process of working with businesses to develop appropriate curriculum utilizing Internet based content and associated applications to replicate the work environment. In addition, business groups voice concerns about the ineffectiveness of the K-12 system in preparing good workers and seem interested in working with K-12 schools to create workforce development career paths with focused content which will attract students to specific careers for the future economy. However, businesses are often unaware of effective content development technologies for workforce development and find it difficult to work with K-12 schools due to constraining state requirements and inadequate funding streams for such efforts. As a result, not only does regional student achievement lag but businesses are often unable to fill important job positions. Both systems lose due to lack of coordinated effort in the region.

Connect SI has a history of successful, innovative collaborations and is the perfect venue for launching the Content Development Team. Included in the collaborative are the Illinois rural counties of: Wabash, Edwards, Wayne, Jefferson, Perry, Randolph, Jackson, Franklin, Hamilton, White, Gallatin, Saline, Williamson, Union, Johnson, Pope, Hardin, Alexander, Pulaski, and Massac, encompassing the Local Workforce Investment Areas of 25, 26, and a portion of 24. Included in these counties are one federally designated empowerment zone and two federally designated champion communities. Sixteen of these 20 counties are a part of a larger geo-culture region referred to as the Lower Mississippi Delta. The

region sadly places first in 15 of 18 Illinois Poverty Summit indicators as documented in 2004 and 2007 Report on Illinois Poverty. In addition, the income levels in the region are the lowest in the state, with the projected new jobs by 2012 paying far below the current state median household income of \$48,008. According to latest figures from the Illinois Department of Employment Security, the median household income is \$30,017.50. Recent worker dislocation events have increased the number of dislocated workers to over 4,000. Unemployment rates consistently exceed the federal rate. The counties cover 7,787 square miles of beautiful terrain, with a population of 423,000 and a workforce of 195,000. Ten of the counties border adjoining states.

Since 2006, Connect SI has successfully completed regional studies and initiatives funded by private and public dollars including the Department of Labor, the Delta Regional Authority, the Illinois governor's subcabinet on economic development and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO). Connect SI has already raised more than \$2.4M in cash and in-kind contributions from private, not-for-profit institutions and local municipalities. This unparalleled level of collaboration has been matched with over \$1.9M in state and federal funds. Steven Mitchell has successfully coordinated the efforts of the Network Provider Community of Interest involving 17 providers in the region. In the past two years, Kathy Lively as Executive Director of Connect SI and Chief Executive Officer of Man-Tra-Con, Corp. has productively managed over \$30 million in state, federal, and private funds.

Jobs created in the initial phase of the CDT would be limited to 10, but over the three year period, 70 positions will be created. The true benefit of the CDT will be measured in the improved incumbent workforce, allowing existing businesses to expand. With the increased use of high tech applications in the schools of the region, more innovative start-ups are also expected. When CDT joins forces with the newly expanding Electronic Medical Records and resulting Health Information Exchange system, workforce impact will greatly expand. Estimates from health care officials in the region place the impact at a minimum of 120 positions, many of which will be at the professional level.

The overall cost of the project for three years would be \$4,352,884. During this three year time frame, the CDT would establish productive relationships with the education and business communities, develop Internet and broadband usage based content venues and applications, partner to execute a Benefits of Broadband awareness campaign and put in place its Sustainability Plan to ensure success beyond the initial three year funding period. Experience with private and public collaborative funding places Connect SI in a strong position to sustain the costs of the CDT.