

Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: City of Houston

Project Title: Houston WeCAN Public Computer Center Initiative

Project Type: Public Computer Center

Executive Summary

The skills necessary to work, prosper and participate in current society are tied to the ability to use information and communication technology tools. While the City of Houston has a reputation for its technological innovation, a digital divide exists and many Houstonians have yet to experience the significant civic, educational and economic benefits of the information age. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project June 2009 report on home broadband adoption, populations most negatively correlated with home broadband adoption include those with a high school diploma or less education, senior citizens 65 or over, and African Americans. It is also significant to note that income is also a factor in broadband adoption; households with lower income levels also show lower levels of broadband use and are less likely to be able to afford the requisite hardware and Internet access required to bridge the digital divide. As meaningful connections are increasingly available primarily online, these groups will be further disconnected from economic opportunity, social services and organizations established to assist them. Because they often have the deepest reach and greatest effect in underserved communities, anchor institutions are critical, strong partners in the effort to make access to broadband and digital literacy training more accessible. However, the demand for this access and training continues to increase. With more than 89,000 computer and Internet user hours logged monthly, wait times of 45 minutes to 3 hours during after-school and evening peak times and wait lists for digital literacy training currently at Houston Public Library demonstrates the need for additional capacity and more centers is critical. Through this Public Computer Center proposal, the City of Houston seeks to expand its digital inclusion initiative, WeCAN (Wireless Empowered Community Access Network). The vision for WeCAN is to create a digital future for all Houstonians by fostering an environment that affords everyone equal access to broadband and the Internet. As a digital literacy effort, WeCAN focuses on drop-out prevention/GED recovery and job/workforce readiness. This is being accomplished in partnership with key stakeholders to create neighborhood “networks” of access, awareness, and programs and services. The deployment of the networks includes affordable broadband Internet access, opportunities to receive low-cost hardware and training, and local content to ensure Houstonians can benefit from the opportunities enabled. The City proposes to target 17 high-need neighborhoods with a goal of making broadband Internet access more accessible through the expansion or creation of 80 public computer centers at easily accessible sites including City facilities and community college library branches. These public computer centers will be staffed by trained “Civic Connectors”, who will provide computer training and help residents access online resources.

Core offerings for public computer centers include:

- Free community broadband Internet access, including high-capacity wireless broadband connection equipment established through the City's BTOP infrastructure grant application
- Free network customer support from City of Houston IT
- Free "train the trainer" digital literacy training
- Up to (10) computer workstations per site or other broadband devices (i.e. kindles, IPD Touches, web cams, etc.)

The estimated number of new potential users of our public computer center(s) is over 28,000 underserved Houstonians. The proposed centers will be open to all Houstonians, with a particular focus on traditionally underserved groups including racial and ethnic minorities, individuals with low educational attainment, children and senior citizens. The City of Houston is committed to bridging Houston's digital divide and has made a substantial investment towards this commitment through the launch of WeCAN, operated under the Houston Public Library (HPL). HPL receives 10.7 million visitors either in person or on-line and answers 2.1 million reference questions annually. Last year, 178,080 people participated in 7,786 programs conducted by the library. Its technology infrastructure provides free access to training facilities, the internet, the library's catalog and online reference services which are provided 24/7. Demand for these classes continues to be high. Through its network of 44 locations, HPL is able to reach citizens across demographically inclusive neighborhoods on a citywide scale. This footprint enables the ability to provide training in the areas of workforce development, technical training and digital literacy, all of which are critical to fueling Houston's economic prosperity.

Public access to technology is an effort that has been underway at HPL since 1993. With libraries located in all parts of the city, particularly in underserved communities, HPL offers access to learning opportunities and innovative technology to more than 27,000 computer users monthly.

The City expects to create jobs through this proposal as follows:

- Employ (1) Project Coordinator to oversee the deployment and operations of the established public computer centers.
- Employ (2) Community Technical Liaisons on a part-time hourly basis to support digital literacy and technical support train the trainer sessions and general technical support across the established centers.
- Employ (51) Civic Connectors on a part-time hourly basis to be staffed at the site and provide assistance with delivery of training, programs and services made available through the computer center.
- Employ the equivalent of (4) full time staff in the first year to support the broadband and computer installations at all sites.

The total project cost is \$4,330,750, of which \$2,713,300 is requested in federal funding against a local match of \$1,617,450.