Monroe County (IN) has a growing life sciences industry, is home to Indiana University, and serves as a regional destination for health care, shopping, dining, and entertainment. Despite these opportunities, 26 percent of the County’s 129,000 residents – nearly 34,000 individuals – live in poverty and at least 17,000 have no Internet access. The community faces four challenges – a changing job market, the need to strengthen 21st century job skills, the need for ongoing support during the job search process, and the need to share resources and expertise among the adult learning community.

The Library is an active participant in the Bloomington Lifelong Learning Coalition, formed in 2007. The Community Learning Center: Monroe County project proposes to fulfill their vision for a lifelong learning center downtown by renovating a 900-square-foot space in the Main Library to create a dedicated "Community Learning Center," with technology lab and classroom. The Center will be dedicated to 21st century learning, especially job search and career preparation for two expanding job sectors – life sciences and hospitality.

Partner organizations will be primary users of the space, which they will reserve using the Library's online reservation software; the Library will also use the space for its own programs, regular technology workshops, and open lab time with staff providing support. The Library and partner organizations will offer basic job search programs (resume writing and interview skills) and specialized sessions targeted to particular audiences, job search challenges, and career sectors identified as priorities for the area (life sciences, hospitality, and starting a small business).

The project can be easily replicated by other Libraries and community centers. It requires limited space, current hardware and software, cross-marketing, and skilled instructors, many of whom work in related areas in community organizations. Print and online resources and curricula developed for job search programs will be available through the Library’s and partners’ websites. The enduring “asset” of the Community Learning Center is the gathering together of the resources in an easy to find, readily accessible location, with a recognizable name and mission.

In 2008, the population of Monroe County was 128,992, including 71,819 residents of Bloomington. The Community Learning Center, will serve working-age adults, including 32,983 aged 18-24, 35,723 aged 25-44, and 24,583 aged 45-64. Within those groups, targeted audiences include approximately 17,000 who do not have computer access at home, 14,846 individuals with disabilities, and 9,782 who speak a language other than English at home, or which approximately 4,000 speak Spanish.
The Library has substantial experience in managing projects similar to this one, as demonstrated by its experience in developing and managing public access computing, recent construction and renovation, and productive partnerships:

In 1997, the Library opened a Public Computing Center designed as a technology classroom for the public. When no classes were scheduled, individuals could use the room. The Library soon learned that these two uses were not compatible, as individuals did not like being asked to leave to make way for a class. Since 1997, the Library has added 74 public computing workstations at the Main Library and dramatically increased its capacity to support users. In 2008, the Library hosted 290,000 individual public computer sessions. Recent focus groups with public computer users confirm that public access computing at the Library is a critically important service. The individuals using Library computers do not have other access and, in general, are novice users who need frequent support. They are doing important work – creating resumes, applying for jobs, checking e-mail and keeping in touch with family, writing books, managing their websites, etc. They would like more access and fewer time limits on use.

Since 2007, the Library has focused on strengthening its job search services, by collecting together and expanding job search and career resources (print and online), developing partnerships with organizations in the community to offer regular programs related to job search skills, and training reference librarians to support individuals using these resources. To each public access computer, the Library added Work Keys software used by many area employers to assess skills, along with Key Train self-paced learning packages aligned to Work Keys.

The Board of Trustees is currently requesting bids for a $1.3 million project to renovate the Main Library in three phases over the next two years. Phase 1 (completed by the end of 2009) includes renovations to the Children’s Department on the first floor, involving replacing carpeting, painting, shifting collections, moving the circulation point and adding more self-check machines, and adding a defined entrance. Phase 2 (of which this project is part, completed by the end of 2010) includes moving a drive-up window in order to extend its hours and consolidate circulation functions, increasing the size of literacy tutoring rooms to accommodate families, replacing worn carpeting on the second floor, clustering public computer workstations closer to staff support, and rearranging collections to create quiet and group study areas. Phase 3 (2011) will expand space for movie and music collections, provide better access to the Friends Bookstore, and improve office spaces for community outreach.

This project will provide employment for a contractor and sub-contractors (demolition, carpentry, electrical work, painting) involved in the renovation of the space, staff to coordinate the Center’s programs, and expert presenters. It will sustain employment of equipment suppliers (tables, chairs, computers) and software for the Center.

Overall cost: BTOP Funds: $204,545; Local Match: $66,715.