Applicant Name: ROCKFORD PUBLIC LIBRARY

Project Title: Rockford Computer Access Network (RCAN or Rockford CAN)

Project Type: Public Computer Center

Executive Summary

a. Statement of Need: The Rockford Computer Access Network (RCAN or Rockford-CAN) is a partnership of 14 community anchor and non-profit organizations who serve the region's most at-risk citizens. RCAN will address four significant problems facing vulnerable populations residing in Winnebago County: 1. The region’s increasing unemployment rate and severely distressed economy. 2. Rockford's lack of affordable public access to high-speed broadband services and equipment, education, training and technical support. 3. Increasing need for job readiness, GED, English as second language and career training programs. 4. Increasing need for citizens to access online e-government resources (Federal, state and local government services) and other online sites for work, healthcare, education and citizenship filings and information at a time when the recession is further limiting their ability to acquire broadband access and computers in their homes. RCAN plans to expand 19 existing public access computer centers in Winnebago County by adding 385 new workstations and replacing 261 existing workstations. This expansion will include additional workstations and services accessible for people with disabilities. The project intends to provide broadband speeds of at least 3 Mbps to 7 locations, 7 Mbps to 2 locations and speeds of 20 Megabits to 6 library locations. Partners will provide free public access computing services to the general public and/or job readiness training classes with a priority focus on the unemployed, underemployed and other vulnerable population for residents of Winnebago County. RCAN will provide professional career training programs at 19 facilities which are located in some of Rockford's lowest income neighborhoods. Additionally RCAN will provide on-line resources to help job seekers learn: resume preparation, test preparation, interviewing skills, job searches, small business start-ups, digital media art, computer software classes and much more. Our target audience includes young adults, unemployed, older displaced manufacturing workers, x-offenders, people with disabilities, homeless and non-English speaking residents. The Rockford Public Library (RPL) is the lead agency for RCAN and is the third largest library system in Illinois. RPL is composed of 6 libraries and manages the largest public computing center in the city with 143 computers currently available system-wide. Our mission is 'to enhance community life and development by informing, educating, entertaining and providing cultural enrichment to all people of all ages.' Rockford, IL was once a thriving manufacturing center, but in the late 1980's many local companies were sold to larger corporations and manufacturing operations moved out of the area. Rockford has never fully recovered from this exodus of well-paid manufacturing jobs. The MSA two-county area has lost 15,000 manufacturing jobs in the past decade. Additionally, the current recession has hit Rockford hard. Our community desperately needs no-cost job training that will prepare our citizens to succeed in a 21st Century digital marketplace. Also due to the recession, the public's demand for public access computers and Internet service has increased
dramatically at a time when providers revenues are decreasing. In 2009 RPL recorded a +35% increase in computer use system-wide. On weekdays we typically record 30-70 people waiting in line at the Main Library to use our computers for 1.5 hours. Studies also report that 72% of people who use computers in a library do not own a computer in their home. A unified and expanded offering of high-speed Internet service, public computers and job training is desperately needed to address the current unemployment crises. b. Overall Approach: Currently the partners of RCAN offer a variety of job or educational training programs at various levels. Our coalition will identify existing training program offerings and develop a targeted, cohesive, high-quality and relevant curriculum geared towards skills that will help residents gain employment. Our project will eliminate duplication of services and develop high-quality job readiness and alternative education programs on a county-wide scope. All residents of Winnebago County can enroll in training program offerings. RCAN brings together two community anchor institutions and two of the largest public service agencies in the city to address broadband and educational needs. These agencies have extensive experience providing job training and enrichment classes as well as managing public computer centers. RPL first introduced PCC's in 1998 and a few years later introduced computer software classes. Our services have continued to grow over the years due to public demand. RCAN will offer an extensive job training curriculum which will be developed by Rock Valley College Continuing Professional Education (CPE) department. CPE has extensive experience providing job readiness training in the community and will travel to agency locations to provide training as needed. Innovation: RPL also plans to install a professional digital media arts center in an existing building and provide public access to media arts equipment and production training. This center will be located in a currently under-utilized building in downtown Rockford thus giving new life to an existing commercial building. The media center will be the first of its kind in the area and provide an educational and creative outlet, as well as providing professional training in the digital arts. The media center will provide training in animation, photography, video, music recording, music editing and publishing. Classes in digital art production will be provided at no cost. RPL also plans to establish a quarterly fee structure so advanced users can pay a minimal quarterly membership fee that allows them access to the facilities for their personal business and creative projects. c. Service Areas: Our program will concentrate services in Rockford IL and surrounding communities within a 50 mile radius. Rockford's population is 157,272 (2008 census est.) and is located in Northwestern IL. The city is: 62.5% Caucasian, 19.9% African American, 14.0% Hispanic and 3.5% other populations. Currently we have an unemployment rate of 17.2% (February, 2010 IDES statistics); 18.5% of families living in poverty and 5.8% of families living in extreme poverty; high school drop-out rate of 24%; and 76% of our children in public school qualify for free or reduced lunches. One in three of our children are living in poverty (2010 Illinois Kids Count Report). Our target audience includes young adults, unemployed, older displaced manufacturing workers, x-offenders, people with disabilities, homeless and non-English speaking residents. RPL recorded 287,254 public access computer sign-ups in 2009 and our partners recorded 24,288 public access computer sign-ups for a total of 311,542 user sign-ups. Our partners reported 50,922 people received training and other support services. In 2009 1,219,550 patrons visited a library facility and 1,200 people completed our computer training classes. We estimate the number of sign-ups for RCAN public computer centers over the three year grant period will increase by 35% or 420,581 sign-ups. d. Qualifications: RPL will serve as lead agency and has extensive experience managing large grants and construction projects. Management staff has excellent capacity to effectively lead implementation and
evaluation of this project, and to efficiently distribute all grant funds according to the proposed timeline. The project management team will include managers from RPL, United Way, Rock Valley College and the Workforce Connection office. RPL employs 85 full and part-time employees and provide over 2,500 educational programs annually. We currently provide 250 hrs. of computer access each week and 280 hrs. of computer and software training classes each year. Our 2010 balanced operating budget is $7,742,034. RPL is managed by an Ex. Director and a nine member Board of Trustees. The scope of work of the project will be managed by our Ex. Director, Chief Financial Officer, Development Officer, IT Services Officer and Marketing Officer. In 2008 RPL staff managed a $4,426,666. purchase and renovation of a 23,000 sq. ft. facility and opened a new branch in March 2009 under-budget. Last year 1,219,550 people visited an RPL facility and 2,041,068 items were circulated. United Way’s Vice President will oversee the scope of work for 9 United Way agencies. The CCE Managing Director will manage all training schedules, provide curriculum & provide class training. Workforce Connection’s 2009 budget was $9.7 million and is a federally funded program. 2,759 clients were served with job readiness and training programs. e. Jobs Saved or Created: RCAN estimates 210 jobs will be saved or created over the two year period of the grant. f. Cost: $19,395,536.19