Executive Summary

The National Black Programming Consortium, a national public media organization with a 30-year track record of increasing capacity in minority communities, seeks funding for its collaborative and scalable Public Media Corps (PMC), a framework for supporting creative, sustainable and community-initiated methods for addressing the broadband divide in communities that have been slow to adopt. Public broadcasting has a long history of using technology to make a range of education materials and information available to communities that otherwise would not have them. This was the rationale behind ‘Sesame Street,’ for example, which made high-quality early childhood education available, via television, to low-income families at a time when TV was still an evolving platform. NBPC is now leveraging our 30-year relationship with public broadcasting to use the same approach 'harnessing the power of both new technologies and compelling public interest content' to making 21st century opportunities available, via broadband, to minority communities. The Public Media Corps project proposes to promote and extend broadband adoption in underserved communities by placing highly skilled Fellows in residencies at underperforming high schools and those in low-income communities, public radio and television stations, and other non-profit anchor institutions in five geographic areas. There, working in regionally managed teams, they will develop interactive web-based and mobile applications driven by compelling local public interest content; design and run training programs for influential community members who can extend the training into the wider community (including educators, parents, youth leaders and social service providers); and observe, document and analyze patterns of use to inform the evolving national standards around 21st century skills and the recently announced national broadband plan. The vulnerable populations that Fellows will be recruited from and will work with are those that have reported high rates of not seeing broadband technologies as relevant to their lives. To reinforce new, sustainable patterns of use of these technologies, Fellows will create interventions specifically adapted to observed patterns of use and will encourage participant investment in customizing all tools, curricula and platforms, leading to ownership and retention. Community members will become empowered stakeholders and evangelists in the process, helping to author and shape initiatives and extend the value of the training they receive many times over. In this way, the technologies will become embedded norms. Each year, millions of dollars are invested in technology-rich educational tools and curricula that go unused because educators have no knowledge of them or lack the capacity to use them. PMC Fellows will work with educators, one-on-one, to eliminate these barriers with the understanding that a new generation of adopters will shape community attitudes. Likewise, each year investments in hardware such as the many public computer centers located in public housing complexes in New York City go underutilized because budget cuts have stripped the centers of...
staff. Working with our partners, such as the New York City Housing Authority, PMC Fellows will light up these centers and make them vibrant community hubs by tapping into existing social networks and leadership structures and providing timely and relevant training and expertise. Because of their roles as mediators of the technology and consultants to partner organizations, PMC Fellows will facilitate participation and engagement in a variety of local issues like employment and economic development, health and municipal services, child and youth welfare, local civic participation, and more through content and services available only via broadband. Loosely modeled on programs such as Teach for America, the PMC will recruit 100 service-minded Americans. These Fellows will each complete two years of service during which they will provide on-the-ground support for the expanding universe of networked providers of public service, across many disciplines. Today, as we consider the promise of expanded infrastructure inherent in the BTOP grant program, it is clear that sustainable adoption of broadband depends on the delivery of real public value through this crucial technology and infrastructure: connecting the pipes to the people through access to meaningful information and participation. Our 30-year experience of convening communities around innovative public media tells us that compelling, relevant and accessible content can and does change patterns of use and is also key to bringing new communities online. Think of the extraordinary examples of PBS series such as Vietnam: A Television History and Eyes on the Prize’media that brought video into the classroom as core texts for the first time. Those interventions used media to change America’s idea of its history in powerful ways. In the same way, the Public Media Corps will use technology to change our sense of the future. Since its primary backbone is a framework for collaboration, depending on deep knowledge and investment in local community, the project will be easily replicated and is totally scalable depending on the input of partners and their resources. It has, in other words, both the compelling relevance of the local and the enduring strength and scale of its national partners. Our existing relationships with foundations and other funders, such as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, will be leveraged from the start. Our partners in philanthropy will be part of consensus-building around ways to create a sustainable model and to create pathways into communities of all types for greatest resource-sharing, to promote information equity through broadband-delivered content and services, and to stimulate demand and create lifelong patterns of use. We expect the sustainability model to include corporate sponsorship, earned income from monetizing the training modules, earned income from licensing educational content and tools, and earned income from work-for-hire on platform and tools development. Dr. Kate Williams, one of the leading academics in Community Informatics in the U.S. and the lead researcher of the original TOP program (the precursor to BTOP), has consistently found that information and community technology (ICT) use is more extensive when, as here, community members are involved and invested. Dr. Williams has employed social network and social capital theory to study how local communities have adopted information and communication technology, with a particular focus on ethnic and/or low-income urban communities. Because such socially excluded communities are the target of the PMC broadband adoption initiative, Dr. Williams’ research is particularly persuasive. While many researchers have traditionally assumed that outside sources are responsible for helping the less fortunate, Dr. Williams’ seminal work in this area has turned popular thinking about social interactions and bridging the digital divide on its head. Her work has demonstrated that ‘the agency of the socially excluded’ is, in fact, ‘central.’ The purpose of each of the scalable and targeted engagement campaigns, which will be the organizing mechanism of the Public Media Corps, is to do just what is suggested in this
important research: build capacity from within, document it, and build toolkits designed with local needs and local patterns of use in mind. This is not a cut-and-paste approach to rudimentary digital literacy (which has not been proven to have any impact whatsoever on sustainable adoption) but rather an attempt to influence perceptions of relevance and cultures of use through intimate, day-to-day work in centers of meaning in each community. The Public Media Corps will generate 122 jobs, including 100 positions for PMC Fellows who will provide tools, training, consultation, and support to their communities, as well as help build capacity in the non-profit sector through their work with our partners. The project will also support the retention of three existing jobs. A variety of small businesses will provide accounting, human resource and technology services to the project. Partners in each of the project's hubs'Upper Manhattan, NY; Atlanta, GA; the Jackson, MS area, including Greenville; Oakland, CA; and Washington, D.C. 'will provide regional office space, staff and resources to the project. We have determined the overall cost for the Public Media Corps to be approximately $14.3 million. To launch and implement the program to its fullest capacity, the National Black Programming Consortium is respectfully requesting $10,964,813 from the NTIA's Broadband Technology Opportunities Program. See, e.g., Kathleen Williams, 2005, 'Social networks, social capital " (dissertation) Ibid. at 154.