On March 28, 2007, the Connect Arkansas (CA) initiative was signed into law to ensure the creation of a competitive broadband, or high-speed internet, infrastructure. Given the importance of broadband internet access to the overall economic development of Arkansas, state leaders took aggressive steps towards addressing broadband access and use through CA. As part of this community-based, economic development initiative, CA quickly began to promote and foster the development of broadband education and access throughout Arkansas. STATEMENT OF NEED. According to the 2008 State New Economy Index by the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, Arkansas ranks 48th in the nation for healthcare, education and business. In regards to this study, 24% of these measurement metrics were tied to internet usage and access. In an independent study conducted by Connect Arkansas in 2008, only 49% of the population subscribed to broadband service, while another 29% had never used the internet. Given these trends, Arkansas is in danger of losing its economic vitality and increasing its poverty rate exponentially. OVERALL APPROACH. CA found that focusing solely on development of broadband infrastructure (i.e. supply), without addressing the low usage of the internet (i.e. demand) will limit the ability for Arkansas to realize productivity gains. In order for broadband infrastructure to translate into productivity gains and job growth, it must first be used in all aspects of healthcare, education, business and economic development. CA’s ‘Expanding Broadband Use in Arkansas’ Sustainable Adoption and Mobile Public Computer Centers programs provide a statewide, strategic approach that provides exposure, education, and opportunity for all Arkansans to utilize broadband internet to enhance their lives and improve productivity. This innovative approach includes the creation of a statewide network of counties dedicated to improving broadband use and access, collaborative dissemination, and creation of outreach programs, and outfitting and engaging mobile broadband labs to reach all corners of the state. AREAS TO BE SERVED. While both rural and urban locations within Arkansas show unserved and underserved broadband Census blocks, this program will serve the state's 75 counties. With a statewide population of 2.8 million, Arkansas sees one of the highest statewide poverty rates in the United States with 15-20% of the total population in poverty according to the U.S. Census 'Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates.' With an emphasis on the more rural regions within Arkansas, CA plans to reach many diverse populations and ages in the state; starting with eastern Arkansas, which consists of the Delta region that is considered one of the most disparate regions in the country. According to the Delta Regional Authority, the poverty rate in the Delta region is 55% higher than the national average. From healthcare, education and population statistics to workforce, broadband access/usage and living standards, the Delta region in Arkansas lacks in every measurement as compared to national statistics. Meanwhile, the southern Arkansas region is starting to see similar
difficulties as the Delta region. South Arkansas faces a poverty rate of 20% or higher, a 30% high school dropout rate, only a 10% college completion rate and a 10% out migration of 20-30 year old residents. In fact, Arkansas has 17 counties listed as 'persistent poverty' counties according to the U.S. Census. It is in counties such as these that the mobile computer labs may be the only means in which to reach such low wealth communities to deliver technology, job, healthcare and other critical educational opportunities. If Arkansas does not provide a means for the citizens of persistent poverty and other low wealth counties the opportunity to start utilizing the internet, those counties will continue to get left behind. The mobile computer labs are capable of bringing access to communities where transportation is a barrier to public computer access. Arkansas acknowledges its need to increase broadband adoption and usage as a critical component to increasing opportunities in the new economy. Through the three-year span of this project, Connect Arkansas and its partners plan to reach 655,200 citizens across the state through the proposed public outreach and training opportunities. Through utilization of three mobile broadband computer labs, CA will have the capacity to offer broadband access to 54 users at a time. If users were given two-hour blocks of time, the three mobile broadband computer labs will have an average capacity of 40,690 users per year. APPLICANT QUALIFICATIONS. In 2009, Connect Arkansas was designated as the lead broadband adoption, mapping and public computer center organization by the Office of the Governor. CA has been engaged in community strategic planning and mapping around broadband internet access since 2007, and the 501(c)(3) organization has been leading the statewide collaborative effort between private and public sectors for over two years. JOBS. Immediately, this program will create 8 full-time salaried and contract positions to ensure the overall program delivery in three years. Our partner organizations project 5 jobs will be saved or created through this program as well. Meanwhile, a 2007 study sponsored by the Brookings Institute found that, for every one percentage point increase in broadband penetration in a state, employment increases by 0.2-0.3% per year. CA estimates a 20% increase in broadband usage in Arkansas per year for the next three years. Based on the Brookings percentage, that will directly or indirectly create new jobs during this time. OVERALL COST. Connect Arkansas is requesting $4,089,858 for the Expanding Broadband Use in Arkansas Mobile Public Computer Centers Program through the Public Computer Centers American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP). The requested funds will be used to purchase, equip and implement three mobile broadband labs as well as the associated education and outreach programs. In addition to state, regional and local partners, Connect Arkansas has engaged in partnerships with the Arkansas State University - Jonesboro Delta Center, the Delta Regional Authority, the Arkansas Association of Two Year Colleges and the Arkansas Health Information Exchange Initiative to implement the mobile broadband computer labs program. Likewise, Connect Arkansas is prepared to match the requested amount with $1,096,050 in both cash and in-kind funds that include public and private sources.