a) Problem / Need Statement The digital divide in SC is becoming greater because the underserved rural areas do not have reliable broadband connectivity. Other areas of the state, primarily the urban centers, have embraced broadband technologies and the internet. They now have expectations for more online services. Without the ability for broadband connectivity and a daily need to use the internet in a relevant manner, the rural areas lack the means and motivation to access court information and make informed decisions. Meanwhile, the areas with broadband continue to demand greater offerings from government and the internet. This current fiscal year, the South Carolina Judicial Department (SCJD) has a $7.6M shortfall in funding that depletes all fiscal reserves. Next fiscal year, indications are that SCJD will be forced to operate at a deficit and will have a $14M shortfall. At the judicial level, 24% of the SC Judicial Department is unfunded. Without this SBA grant, the third branch of government could not address the problem of the digital divide in South Carolina. b) Overall Approach Building upon a strong court technology foundation, the SC Judicial Department (SCJD) will promote the use of broadband by teaching digital literacy and relevance to the municipal judges and court personnel in the most rural and underserved areas of South Carolina. Broadband connectivity will be provided to 83 municipalities in 29 rural South Carolina counties. Estimates indicate broadband is currently available in approximately half of these locations. SCJD will conduct training for the Court CMS application and awareness sessions for representatives of the municipalities. These training and awareness sessions will use seven public computer centers (PPC) of the SC Technical Community Colleges that are strategically located in the rural areas in SC. Statewide searches and real time reporting capabilities will be accessed online so users will have no other choice than to use broadband for accessing information and making informed decisions. This project will assist government agencies as well as citizens in making meaningful decisions from their data. An electronic filing system will be created so the courts will receive the data electronically in the existing statewide CMS. This system will translate the manual, paper-based back-office work processes into a streamlined, automated electronic counter. SCJD will employ a methodical, disciplined, building block approach to the four technology initiatives. c) Areas and Populations Served SC has the 4th highest unemployment in the nation at 12.6% (US Department of Labor, BLS Statistics, June, 2009). The State also has challenges with modest levels of education. SC is ranked 47th regarding 9th graders who graduate from high school, (National Center for Higher Education, 2006), 8th in the nation related to domestic violence (Office of SC Attorney General, 2010) and 5th in the nation regarding violent crime (FBI, 2009). In addition, the SC Courts have the highest caseload per judge at the trial court level (average 4374 cases per judge), more than twice the national average (average 1761 cases per judge). SC also has the fewest judges per population in the country. (NCSC, 2008) Regarding
broadband access, SC has the second lowest number of households with broadband access in the nation at 39.1% (US Census Bureau, Internet and Computer Use Supplement to the Current Population Survey, 2007). With this SBA grant, the SC Courts will specifically address getting broadband connectivity in the 83 municipalities in the 29 most rural counties. Currently 19.2% of the population in these 29 rural counties falls below the national poverty level (SC Office of Research and Statistics, 2010). These communities will have 200 judges and clerks directly involved with CMS training and 1000 participants in the awareness sessions. The online services and electronic filing will serve SC's four million citizens. d) Qualifications The SCJD leadership has been stable and consistent since Chief Justice Toal took office in 2000. The IT director reports directly to the Chief Justice. In addition, the IT managers for networking, the CMS application, internal applications and webmaster, call center and systems integrator report to Joan Assey, the IT director. These individuals have been part of the IT leadership team for the last 8 years, and together they have integrated technology with the judicial process. Since 2000, this leadership team has pursued and been awarded numerous federal and state grants through five different programs and agencies that totaled approximately $58M. These grant projects have established the network infrastructure and internet broadband connectivity for the counties as well as the judicial department. CMS and a solicitor case management system have been developed and deployed to the circuit and magistrate courts as well as the solicitors' offices. A judicial call center for the support and training was established. A web site was created as a portal to court information. Also, SCJD began using document management systems (imaging) for scanning and retrieval. Collectively, these various grants and initiatives have established a technology foundation that has become an inherent part of the daily operations of SCJD. This SBA grant will build upon this foundation. It will enable SC Courts to take the next steps to deliver broadband to the municipal courts in the most rural areas while developing online search capabilities for the entire state. Chief Justice Toal's current term expires in 2014 which is after the end of this SBA grant. Her technology leadership team with a proven history of success with court automation as well as collaboration with the counties and other agencies in South Carolina has delivered on large federal grant projects; now it is the time to make Increasing Community Access to the SC Courts a reality. e) Jobs Saved or Created During the time of establishing connectivity to the rural municipalities, integrating the court CMS the judicial process, creating statewide searches/real time reporting capabilities and developing electronic filing 164 jobs will be created. After this SBA grant is complete, it is estimated that additional positions will be created to use these online court systems and functions in the courts, law firms, and technology support organizations. f) Overall Cost SCJD is requesting $10,504,979 in BTOP funds for this SBA project. The SC Courts and our partners commit an in-kind match of $4,494,721, 30% of the total project budget of $14,999,700.