Executive Summary

Problem: Vulnerable populations in Onondaga County, New York encounter significant barriers to using broadband effectively. The first is no access to high-speed broadband at home. ProLiteracy and our project partners are not aware of Onondaga County specific data, but surveys conducted regularly by the Pew Internet and American Life Foundation consistently show a big gap in who has broadband at home: almost three quarters of Americans with some college education have broadband at home, while fewer than a quarter with less than a high school education have home broadband. Income statistics show a gap almost as large: 83% of Americans who make $75,000 and above have broadband at home; only 42% who make less than $30,000 do. Public Computer Centers at community anchor institutions are a great resource for vulnerable populations without home broadband, but in Onondaga County, these institutions are beginning to feel like part of the problem when lines and waiting lists for appointments discourage potential users especially among vulnerable populations. Other community service agencies operating computer centers have outdated equipment or computers not linked to the Internet, which is especially discouraging to at-risk youth participating in after-school activities at the Boys & Girls Clubs. A second barrier to broadband use is equally important for vulnerable populations -- the lack of skills necessary for finding and evaluating online information and using it in their daily lives. Staff at existing PCCs often do not have access to the right kind of materials or training to help as much as they would wish, or staff may not be able to devote enough time to individuals to give them the amount of help they need. Overall Approach: The Life Links project approach to addressing the need for broadband access and in-depth content for vulnerable populations in Onondaga County is a community partnership among anchor institutions and service agencies. The diverse Life Links partners have joined together to make Public Computer Centers in the County work better for the people who most need to use them. The Life Links project will expand meaningful access to broadband for vulnerable populations in Onondaga County. Because meaningful access takes more than the ability to get online, Life Links will equally emphasize education and training that gives vulnerable populations the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to know how to use broadband to get the information and resources that will help them achieve their educational, employment, and life goals. Vulnerable populations served by Life Link partners will include unemployed and displaced workers; low-income children, adults, and families; seniors; people with disabilities; people with low literacy levels or limited English proficiency; refugees; at-risk youth; and members of minority populations who have traditionally used broadband at lower rates. Although each Life Links partner will retain its individual broadband programs and strategies, all partner PCC workstations also will have visible, easy access to the Life Links portal, which will make available a wealth of partner-recommended existing materials in addition to new in-depth content
developed by ProLiteracy and WCNY for use by all partners. This project-developed content will seek to fill a gap in instructional content and other resources on digital literacy, workforce readiness and job training, and health and safety information for adults with low literacy levels or limited English proficiency, as well as for other vulnerable populations. Partnering with ProLiteracy on Life Links will be WCNY, Onondaga Community College, Onondaga County Public Library, Liverpool Library, Say Yes to Education, Syracuse Housing Authority, Boys and Girls Clubs, Women’s Opportunity Center, and Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County. Life Links will create through 4 new and 16 expanded Public Computer Centers throughout Onondaga County that will provide both broadband access and deepened education and training resources. Through Life links, ProLiteracy will provide project partners with equipment, technical and program support, project outreach, and other resources. Life Links also will include a mobile component in which broadband-connected notebook computers, content resources, and broadband training will be available through ProLiteracy for one-time or regularly scheduled use by community organizations serving vulnerable populations. Through Life Links, key partners will develop permanent new capacity to provide meaningful access to broadband, capacity that will be sustained through ongoing community outreach by ProLiteracy and WCNY and the continued availability of in-depth training resources through ProLiteracy’s Life Links website. Area to Be Served: The Life Links project will serve Onondaga County, which has a population of 452,633; 81.8% of county residents are white; 10.3% are black; 3.1% are Latino; 1% are American Indian and Alaska Natives; 2.5% are Asian/Pacific Islander. Most Life Link PCCs will be in the City”s and County”s poorest neighborhoods. Inner city Syracuse, a newly designated federal Empowerment Zone where several Life Links PCCs will be located, including the new ProLiteracy/WCNY/Say Yes to Education PCC, has a poverty rate of 15%, and the County has seen increased unemployment driven by layoffs and reduced work hours at major County employers. The County lost 5,481 net jobs between 2008 and 2009 (Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages). The County and Central New York region are home to a rapidly growing population of refugees, as well as immigrants with very low literacy in English and often in their first language also. The region is now home to new Americans from over 60 countries, and the refugee and immigrant population is rising at the same time that the population of native-born citizens is decreasing, making new, non English-speaking Americans an increasing percentage of the population. Refugees are an especially fast-growing part of the non-native born population. According to the New York State Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance, 20 percent of all refugees arriving in New York State in 2008 were settled in Onondaga County. While this influx of new Americans brings renewed energy and vibrancy to the region, it also strains the ability of community-based organizations to provide the services and assistance these immigrants and refugees need including access to English language learning programs. The four Life Link PCCs coordinated by the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County will be an essential community resource for this vulnerable population. Applicant Qualifications: ProLiteracy is national 501(c)(3) organization with members in every state and the District of Columbia. ProLiteracy is a leader in the adult education field in using broadband technology to deliver training and resources to practitioners throughout the country. We host, design, and build intensive, facilitated online course offerings for other national adult education organizations and have partnered for several years with the Verizon Foundation on its Thinkfinity Web-based network, which delivers free, top-quality online educational resources for literacy instruction and lifelong learning that strengthen skills for success in the 21st Century. ProLiteracy has decades of experience successfully managing projects and has
completed several projects of similar scope and complexity. Although we are a national organization that works internationally, ProLiteracy is deeply committed to the Syracuse community. Like WCNY, our lead Life Links partner, ProLiteracy is relocating our headquarters from suburban Syracuse to an inner city neighborhood in need of redevelopment in order to support community redevelopment. Jobs to Be Created or Saved: 51.8 Overall Cost of the Proposed Project: $4,771,770