The expansion of broadband access and connectivity is vital to the economic development and viability of families, institutions, businesses, and communities across North Carolina. According to census data from 2000, over 80 of the 100 counties in the state are defined as rural and represent un-served, under-served, and 'hard to reach' locations for broadband infrastructure. In July 2009, the North Carolina state government released a broadband inventory map that documented broadband access and availability across the state. The inventory determined that while broadband service, at that time, was available to 92% of North Carolina households statewide, 241,000 households were being un-served by broadband providers. Regions of the state that showed the greatest need for broadband access and connectivity included the Western, Coastal Plain, and Southeastern/Sandhills parts of the state. State government and social services recognized the necessity of adopting broadband technology in order to remain economically competitive, while specific areas of education, legal justice, and health care are sited as especially impacted by lack of access to broadband. State government has continued to prioritize broadband connectivity and adoption to respond to these challenges. North Carolina has seen key investments in the development of middle middle infrastructure, as a result. However, while the expansion of broadband infrastructure and networking has been made possible by projects like the Building a Sustainable Middle-Mile Network for Underserved Rural North Carolina project of MCNC, last mile initiatives are required in order to engage end-users in the available resources. Throughout North Carolina, the growing broadband infrastructure creates an opportunity for institutions like North Carolina Central University School of Law to craft inter-institutional and cross-regional programs that promote broadband adoption and meet critical needs in our communities. The NCCU School of Law Virtual Justice Broadband Project will draw new and under-served users to broadband through a unique application of technology that provides legal education and resources to communities across the state. The project will respond to several key needs in North Carolina, by providing remote learning opportunities to low and median income students at HBCUs, offering pro bono legal resources via the Virtual Justice model, and encouraging broadband adoption through the innovative video telepresence design. NCCU School of Law will partner with Kontek Systems to custom-design a system for specific use in remote legal applications, at Elizabeth City State University, North Carolina Agriculture and Technology University, Fayetteville State University, and Winston-Salem State University. These anchor institutions will work with NCCU School of Law to provide distance learning opportunities in legal concepts, as well as pro bono legal education for low-income populations in each region. The impact that poverty has on access to legal justice is great. In 2005, the North Carolina Supreme Court commissioned a study chaired by Chief Justice Sarah Parker to explore the need to expand civil legal
representation for people of low income and modest means in the state. An initial report of the North Carolina Equal Access to Justice Commission in 2008, found that: 'When they need assistance with a civil legal matter, over 80% of low-income people and people of modest means cannot afford to pay attorneys and are unable to secure representation from publicly funded attorneys or pro-bono volunteers.' The Virtual Justice Broadband Project will respond to pressing legal issues facing low-income communities, particularly in Family, Veterans, and Civil Law. The project will concentrate both on low-income communities in the state and on institutions serving African-American populations.

There is a significant geographic and demographic overlap between North Carolina regions under-served by broadband access, and those with high concentrations of poverty and minority populations. Of the counties currently being un-served or underserved by broadband, the majority are located in the Coastal Plain and Southeastern/Sandhills regions of the state, where many of the state's poorest communities live. According to the North Carolina Rural and Economic Development Center, twenty-three counties in North Carolina had poverty rates over 18% in 2003. All of these counties are rural, and 19 of them are located in the Coastal Plain region. All of the 23 counties in which North Carolina's lowest income communities live are counties currently under-served by broadband. Finally, these persistently poor counties have the highest concentration of African-Americans in the state. While greater than 50% of the 560,000 rural people living in poverty are white, the poverty rate for rural blacks, which was 27% in 2003, is more than 1.5 times greater than the rate for rural whites. In 10 Coastal Plain counties, all of which are under-served by broadband access, more than a third of blacks live in poverty. Another region of focus for the project includes counties in the Southeast/Sandhills region, especially Pender, Robeson, and Columbus Counties, which also show significant concentrations of low-income African-Americans lacking in broadband access. The universities that are participating in the project, particularly Elizabeth City State University and Fayetteville State University, serve as anchor institutions for these target populations. These institutions recognize the potential of broadband expansion to transform these communities for the better, by connecting low-income individuals with critical resources. NCCU School of Law is the ideal institution to design and coordinate the Virtual Justice Broadband application, given our commitment to incorporating technology and our proven approach to community legal education. NCCU School of Law is the only HBCU in the state and one of only two public institutions with a professional program in Law, and has been voted #1 Best Value in a law school education by National Jurist in 2009 and 2010 and is ranked 20th overall in the nation. Additionally, during the 2008-2009 academic year, 502 students participated in pro bono and clinical internships and externships at NCCU School of Law. These students provided 9,767 hours in free legal assistance to approximately 93 legal organizations, at a value of more than $1.1 million in services. The total budget of the NCCU School of Law Virtual Justice Broadband Project is $2,832,426. The budget includes a 30.1% match of $853,900, provided by in-kind and direct contributions from the project partners. Through this project, 7 new jobs will be created, three of those new positions at the NCCU School of Law, and one at each anchor institution.