a. Statement of the Problem or Need: The compelling problems addressed in the Bridging Sustainable Communities: Increasing Community Access to Broadband are access to computers with broadband service, usage of broadband resources and awareness of benefits of broadband, especially among vulnerable populations. According to U.S. Census data, Mississippi ranks at the bottom nationally in percent of households with access to the Internet. Only 56 percent of households have Internet access, compared to 74 percent nationally. Of the 56 percent having Internet access, 82 percent have high-speed connection, thus, only 46 percent of households in Mississippi have high speed Internet. Mississippi has the lowest Internet penetration and ranks last in the use of the Internet. Nearly 48 percent of students who attend school in Mississippi have no Internet access at home. In the four-county targeted area, over 50 percent of the K-12 school children do not have Internet access at home. Schools are unable to fully utilize online programs to connect students and parents to their schools. A review of the proposed targeted area indicated gaps in broadband service to be primarily in rural sections of the counties. According to the Neilson Claritas 2008 Convergence Audit survey, there are more homes without computers than homes with computers but lacking Internet access. Therefore, the problem becomes both availability of computers and access to the Internet. This project addresses the problem by providing convenient locations of public computer centers in rural libraries and community college campuses. Awareness campaigns should increase usage of online technology. MGCCC lacks internal bandwidth and network capacity for today's educational program/service requirements. Currently, the college's infrastructure capacity is one gigabit per second as compared to industry standards of 10 gigabytes per second. This limits the number of devices that can connect to the network. With the proposed upgrade, the internal bandwidth will increase to 10 gigabits, building capacity for online devices by ten. This will allow for public computer centers on each campus, provide technology capacity for an increasing number of students and support opportunities for underserved populations, job creation and economic development. b. Overall Approach to Addressing the Need: The purpose of the Bridging Sustainable Communities: Increasing Community Access to Broadband project is to expand public computer center capacity in community anchor institutions—community college and rural public libraries—in underserved areas of south Mississippi. Broadband access will be increased for the general public, small businesses, populations in underserved areas and vulnerable populations to include unemployed, senior adults, children and people with disabilities. Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, in partnership with regional library systems, WIN Job Centers and the Stone/George County Schools, proposes to create/expand ten public computer centers at four campus locations and six rural libraries across four counties in south Mississippi. The project will add 95 new, high-speed
Internet accessible computer workstations including stations for persons with disabilities and be staffed with facilitators/trainers to provide free access to computers, high-speed Internet and training. The additional computer workstations will add over 17,000 contact hours of high speed Internet availability per week for public access in the targeted area. An estimated 450 additional users per week will access public computer centers and during the three-year period, over 22,500 hours of training (7,500 hours per year) will be offered. To accommodate campus-based public computer centers and other broadband supported educational programs/services, MGCCC bandwidth and network capacity will be increased to support 10 gigabits per second, the industry standard, and provide for a ten-fold increase in the capacity to add devices to the system. A partnership of MGCCC, rural libraries, WIN Centers and schools is a logical plan for increasing public access to broadband and supporting services in this area because: 1. The community college has strategically located campuses. 2. Libraries have locations in rural areas and work with MGCCC in outreach activities. 3. WIN Centers are located in two of the counties and partners with MGCCC to provide employment services. 4. School districts partner with MGCCC on educational programs and rely on libraries for after-school access to educational resources. Leveraging facilities, personnel and services with BTOP grant resources will support educational, economic and quality of life opportunities for the same communities. Project partners include: Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College Jackson-George Regional Library System Harrison County Library System Pine Forest Regional Library System Mississippi Library Commission Stone County School District George County School District Workforce Investment Network Center Biloxi Workforce Investment Network Job Center Gulfport Workforce Investment Network Job Center Pascagoula Stone County Economic Development Partnership c. Areas To Be Served, Population of the Target Areas, Estimated Number of Potential Users of the PCCs. The proposed project will serve Stone, George, Harrison and Jackson counties (population, 344,000) with services targeting the areas underserved with broadband access, primarily rural sections of the counties. The proposed public computer center project will serve the general public and offer specific services to vulnerable populations. Thirty-nine percent, or 134,000, of the four-county population live in rural areas, much of which has limited broadband service. Twenty-one percent of the four-county area population is classified as disabled. Fifty percent of K-12 students are without access to Internet at home and 54 percent of the students receive free and/or reduced lunches, identifying households as low income. The senior population is increasing in number and has been identified as a vulnerable population group. Over the three-year grant period, a projected 15,300 individuals (5,100/year) will be directly served by the public computer center, which includes 4,500 participants in training activities. d. Qualifications of the Applicant that Demonstrate the Ability to Implement the Project. MGCCC is a fully accredited comprehensive community college with seven campuses and centers throughout south Mississippi. The college has a 100 year history of responding to demands of its service area with college transfer programs, technical and career programs, workforce development and continuing education. Serving over 10,000 credit and 27,000 workforce, continuing education and special interest students annually, the college ranks in the top 100 associate degree producing colleges in the nation. Administering over $26 million in grants and contracts each year, the college has documented success in the management and accountability of funds, as reflected in its annual audits. MGCCC has the administrative capacity and experience in managing and implementing projects of the proposed project size and nature. For example, major projects have been completed and/or ongoing with the U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Department of Education, National Science
Foundation and U.S. Department of Interior, State of Mississippi and private foundations. e. Jobs to be
Saved or Created The proposed project is projected to create and/or save 10 FTE direct jobs. Over the
three-year grant period with entrepreneurial training and small business development services, the
proposed project is expected to support the development of 15 new or expanded small businesses
creating 20 new jobs. An estimated five indirect jobs will be saved as a result of the proposed
infrastructure and technology investment related to broadband expansion. An estimated 405 persons
will gain employability skills and job search assistance to realize job placement. The total proposed
project budget is $4.4 million which includes a BTOP grant request in the amount of $2.6 million and
$1.8 million or 40 percent in matching funds. Matching funds include a 20 percent cash match and
approximately 20 percent in-kind match.