The Glades Broadband Initiative (GBI) will provide broadband access to economically distressed rural communities within Palm Beach County. The project will extend the County-owned fiber optic network and connect to the US Metro network, build a local fiber loop in the Glades region and connect public community anchor institutions and non-profit and for-profit entities in the region. The proposed service area covers approximately 35 square miles and includes the geographically isolated western Palm Beach County communities of Belle Glade, Pahokee and South Bay; GBI will interconnect critical community anchor institutions in the identified communities, including 15 public PreK-12 schools, Palm Beach State College, Lakeside Medical Center, 31 government buildings, 7 public safety buildings and 3 public libraries. Our Last Mile service provider, US Metro, LLC, will expand commercial services into unserved and underserved areas. Utilizing this extended network, they will provide competitive services to this remote area. A significant benefit of the project is the ability to leverage the fiber to support multiple uses including: public safety (fire-rescue, law enforcement and emergency management); transportation; education; health care; workforce preparation and economic development in these rural communities. Additional connectivity will facilitate the coordination of governmental services, including critical off-site data storage, inter-agency communication, and coordination with public safety agencies, particularly for hurricane preparedness and disaster recovery. Palm Beach Broadband (PBB) is a consortium of six agencies: Palm Beach County government, School District of Palm Beach County, Palm Beach State College, Florida Atlantic University, South Florida Water Management District and Palm Beach County Education Commission. Our formal agreement for interagency cooperation was adopted in 2007. In this agreement, the agencies agree to leverage the infrastructure and talent of the collective group for the benefit of the citizens of Palm Beach County. To guarantee success, the agencies co-fund a project manager to direct and coordinate our work. PBB has a track record of successfully implementing multiple inter-agency broadband projects. Prior success has been due to the talent and commitment of the leadership team as well as the strategic input from all stakeholders throughout the process. Similar stakeholder input will be sought as the project is implemented in all partner communities. The PBB steering committee is comprised of the Chief Technology Officers from Palm Beach County, Palm Beach State College, Florida Atlantic University, the School District of Palm Beach County, South Florida Water Management District and the Executive Director of the Palm Beach County Education Commission. The project team has substantial technical training and years of experience in managing complex projects from conception to implementation. They also bring to the project the added talent and resources from their respective organizations. This team has a history of success. Since 2006, PBB has delivered community projects such as connectivity to schools, municipalities and public access. The purpose of this
The project will be to: 1) connect community anchor agencies; 2) establish a public-private partnership; 3) provide broadband access and service in the economically distressed Glades region; 4) provide broadband access to community colleges; 5) connect public safety entities; and 6) provide broadband access to the unserved and underserved population in the Glades region. GBI will expand commercial competitive service to the same region and facilitate the interconnection of regional networks. Direct connectivity will be provided from Palm Beach west with future potential to interconnect other regional networks to circle Lake Okeechobee and serve the rural heartland areas of south central Florida. Palm Beach County has already connected its network to Martin County and has a letter of commitment to also interconnect to Broward County (OneBroward) and Miami-Dade Broadband. The Glades Region, including Belle Glade, South Bay, Pahokee, is one of the most impoverished areas in the nation. Statistics from the 2000 Census showed the median household income in Belle Glade was $22,715, with almost 33% of the population below the poverty line. More than 1/5 of the households earn less than $10,000 annually. Staggering unemployment rates approach 40% and the effects are multi-generational. There is a shortage of doctors and healthcare professionals. School age children are behind in education. Lagging statewide test scores, low enrollment in college, active gang activity, high teen pregnancy rates and high incidents of violent crime are all indicators of severe challenges of this rural community. The drive from either coast of Florida to the Glades Community winds through nearly 40 miles of sugar cane fields and agricultural farmland highlighting the geographic isolation. Available Internet access is limited and the cost is largely unaffordable, compounding the feeling of isolation. Agriculture is the primary industry in the region today. The area faces further economic challenges with the state's purchase of land currently used for sugar production as part of the Everglades restoration program. This action will result in the closing of a major sugar mill, displacing hundreds of workers. As this mill is one of the largest employers in the Glades, this will have a severe impact to this already economically distressed region. Federal funding to expand broadband networks to the Glades regions is essential. All units of local government and educational institutions in Palm Beach County are challenged to maintain their existing levels of service as operating budgets continue to shrink; thus this project is beyond the means of the partner agencies. From the standpoint of financial and operational sustainability, we are well positioned to make this project a success. Palm Beach County has been building and managing a fiber-optic network since the mid-1990's and maintains a staff of experienced network engineers. The County maintains a 7X24 help desk function with support staff on-call around the clock. Further, the County's annual capital budget provides for the renewal, replacement and improvement of network infrastructure items. Charges for network services provided to the anchor institutions and the sale of bandwidth capacity through managed services agreements will generate additional revenues to help fund the annual operating and capital costs associated with the new network infrastructure to be built through this grant application. Palm Beach County government's seriousness of commitment to provide broadband access to this historically lagging region should be apparent to the BTOP grant reviewers. Despite facing another year in a series of base operating budget cutbacks and slashed capital budgets, the County has agreed to fund two-thirds of the required grant match in the form of direct budgetary appropriates (more than $1.7 million cash match) with an additional in-kind match valued at $850,000. The GBI project is innovative, focused, well planned, and will benefit the Glades residents and institutions in ways that can help turn the tide of decades of destitution and neglect.