Residents in the South Central and Central counties of Alabama are faced with significant challenges that limit their ability to obtain and benefit from access to affordable broadband services. The Challenge of Economic Integration and Educational Attainment: The economic conditions in these communities present significant challenges for its residents. Depending upon the location from 18% to 36% of the adult population residing in our 8 county service area live below the national poverty line. This condition is particularly severe for school age children with 27% to 47% of them living below the poverty rate. The need for literacy programs in these counties is significant. The percent of residents lacking basic literacy skills range from 19% to 30%. Recently, the Southern Education Foundation, commissioned a study that concluded almost 60 percent of the state's income gap with the rest of the nation can be blamed on Alabama's lower levels of education. In spite of the provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act Alabama students continue to lag behind the rest of the country. Alabama in recent years has ranked near the bottom nationally in its dropout rate, landing between 42nd and 47th in state rankings, according to the foundation. And the average Alabamian in 2006 earned $5,788 less than the average American. "Something has to be done about that extraordinary dropout rate, or the consequences are going to be far more severe in Alabama's income and economy than they ever have been," said Steve Suitts, the foundation's vice president. Rural Alabama's Health Challenge: According to Alabama's Department of Health: '55 out of 67 of Alabama's counties are considered rural.' 2,031,229 residents or 43.6 percent of the entire Alabama population live in rural areas. 'There are 60 primary care health professional shortage areas in Alabama.' The potential number of patients for each rural Alabama primary care physician in 2006 was nearly 2,160 compared to only 1,250 for those practicing in urban counties. Medically Underserved Areas/Populations (MUA/MUP) are areas or populations designated by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) as having: too few primary care providers, high infant mortality, high poverty and/or high elderly population. HRSA has also designated these counties as Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) which means that the residents experience shortages of primary medical care, dental or mental health providers. The health impact on these communities is particularly distressing. Take for example Alabama's infant mortality rate which in 2005 was the second highest in the country. Currently infant mortality rates in these counties range from 5% to 24%. The percentage of Alabama's medically underserved children living in these counties ranges from 45% to 48%. These indicators not only reveal the disparity in health care access but also a diminished capacity to create healthy lifestyles for future generations. Health awareness and access to health services are critical components of Alabama's strategy for growth and prosperity. The FCC in their National Broadband Plan recognizes that strategies leveraging the use of telehealth and telemedicine
technologies are vital components of the rural health care support mechanism and public safety programs. But without a plan to address the glaring disparities in health outcomes and behavior, Alabama's most vulnerable populations living within its MUA/MUP's will continue to experience alarmingly high rates of disease. Each of the seven counties selected for service listed in Table 1 also qualify as medically underserved areas. Table 1 Butler Dallas Lowndes Conecuh Escambia Wilcox Crenshaw Jefferson Table 1 contains a list of the communities selected for deployment of sustainable broadband adoption programs and the enrollment rate projections over the initial two-year period of BTOP funding support of $7 million. Alabama's Broadband Challenge: According to ConnectingALABAMA, a multi-year initiative promoting the availability and adoption of broadband internet access throughout the state of Alabama, we also have a quality state network and partnerships with Alabama's ISPs to deliver government services, distance learning and connectivity to multiple public libraries. However, like many other rural states, we have many 'dead zones' where mobile data service and high-speed internet are either not available at all or deliver low bandwidth that falls beneath the tiered classifications as set forth by the FCC in late 2008. Rural healthcare, economic development, agriculture and other areas are at a distinct disadvantage due to broadband inaccessibility. BTOP Statutory Purpose The solution to the enormous challenges facing the communities within Alabama's southern, central and south central counties will be addressed by an ambitious public-private partnership focused on addressing BTOP's statutory purpose of providing broadband education, awareness, training, access, equipment, and support to schools, libraries, medical and health care providers, universities, community colleges, non-profit organizations and workforce development programs to facilitate greater use of broadband services. The South Central Alabama Broadband Commission was established to address the challenges faced by communities containing 820,000 residents, 325,000 households, and 20,000 businesses operating across approximately 6,000 square miles supporting some of Alabama's most vulnerable populations. The South Central Alabama Broadband Commission is a public-private partnership composed of the states Historically Black Colleges and Universities and partners from non-profit healthcare, and community and non-profit organizations, county governments and private industry. The list of members is presented in Table 2: Table 2 HBCU Core Institutions Alabama State University Tuskegee University Miles College Non-Profit Organizations Community Cares Network Bolling Foundation Faith In Action County Governments Escambia Lowndes Macon Private Industry A2D, Inc. A-PLUS Trillion The members of the South Central Alabama Broadband Commission are uniquely qualified to address the challenges facing their target communities and fulfilling BTOP's statutory purpose. Alabama State University (ASU) as the applicant for the sustainable broadband adoption program will provide leadership and coordination to the consortia of academic, non-profit organizations, county governments and private industry partners working to address the needs of residents living and working within the south central and central counties within the state. ASU will develop branded content and curricula products to support the adoption of broadband technology across each of the communities listed in the target areas. The HBCU core of universities participating in this consortium provides a combined 380 years of experience developing leaders for the state of Alabama. Collectively these institutions exert a combined economic impact on their regional economy valued at $338 million annually. According to data published by the National Center for Education Statistics in their 2006 study of HBCUs, 'the greatest impact of this economic activity is felt more in rural communities'. In addition, these institutions manage accredited schools of agricultural science, allied
health, business, education, engineering and social work that are recognized by state, national and international accreditation organizations. In collaboration with city and county governments, these institutions have designed effective workforce development programs that target vulnerable rural and urban populations as well as serve the needs of local industry. The non-profit organizations participating in this consortium provide more than 50 years of expertise in community outreach, social entrepreneurship, and the delivery of free health care services to MUA/MUP living in rural or high risk urban areas. These organizations provide a network of state-wide resources committed to serving the needs of rural residents in need of affordable broadband services that reaches across each of the counties selected for support. The private industry organizations participating in this consortium provide the technological expertise needed to build and operate the infrastructure needed to deliver affordable broadband service. The objective of the South Central Alabama Broadband Commission is to utilize a combination of technology-based economic development strategies to facilitate economic development within the target areas. Using this approach we estimate that we can create 76 job-years across 8 counties from federal spending.