Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: NORTH STAR FUND, INC., THE

Project Title: The New York Constellation of Community Computer Centers

Project Type: Public Computer Center

_______________________ Executive Summary_______________________

The New York Constellation of Community Computer Centers is a collaboration among nonprofit organizations and public schools to expand public computer center access in vital community support institutions throughout New York City. Led by North Star Fund, a New York community foundation since 1979, our strategy is to deliver broadband access to the city’s most vulnerable populations by embedding public computer centers within the community-based facilities they already use for essential services. The goals of The New York Constellation of Community Computer Centers are 1) To increase broadband access and usage among New York’s most vulnerable populations who cannot be reached through traditional government agencies and institutions, such as libraries and public housing facilities. 2) To enhance local anchor institutions’ capacity to deliver essential services, such as computer literacy training, to their communities. Broadband access is essential for job accessibility and labor mobility, according to a March 2010 study on the Economic Impact of Digital Exclusion. Research by the Pew Center from July 2009 found 88% of people who have access to the Internet have used it as a resource to cope with the current recession, including 67% to hunt for bargains, 41% to search for jobs, and 25% to improve job skills. Large segments of the New York City population are cut off from this resource. This proposal responds to a pervasive need with regard to improving broadband service adoption rates. The most recent localized data available, a survey released by the City's Economic Development Corporation in July 2008, found that adoption rates in some parts of New York are below those in even the most rural areas of the country. Among low-income residents, only 26% have a broadband connection at home, compared to 54% in middle and higher income groups. The entire borough of the Bronx has only 38% at-home adoption, below the NTIA benchmark for underserved. Rates of adoption are persistently low among demographics targeted by this proposal including African Americans, Latinos, immigrants, and the homeless. These vulnerable populations are, by definition, hard to reach with municipal services, so an intervention based solely on government institutions like libraries or public housing will leave them behind. Reaching them with computer services requires longstanding relationships of trust and specific cultural competence, which are the core strengths of North Star Fund and its partners in the The New York Constellation of Community Computer Centers. Our partner organizations are all staffed by members of the community. This project will leverage that social capital to close the digital divide among New York’s most vulnerable populations. The need is even more specialized than governmental versus non-governmental institutions. For example, two Constellation partners, New Immigrant Community Empowerment, which will receive 17 workstations, and Desis Rising Up and Moving, which will receive 32 workstations, are both located in Jackson Heights, Queens, but one serves Latino immigrants and the other serves South Asian immigrants. Placing 49 workstations in one or the other'
or that many more in the local branch of the Queens Public Library might look the same in terms of workstations per capita, but would leave an entire subset of the community unserved. Thus, the Constellation offers an important complement to computer centers in government institutions. North Star Fund is a New York community foundation that supports grassroots groups leading the movement for equality, economic justice and peace. Over the past 30 years, we have given more than $30 million to over 1600 community groups operating in New York City. For this project, we have partnered with 21 community support institutions, each of which serves a specific community with limited access to broadband. Combined, these partners bring over two centuries of organizational experience providing essential services to New York’s most economically distressed communities. Each organization will host one or more computer centers in their existing community-accessible centers with services designed to serve a specific vulnerable population. Our technical assistance provider, People's Production House, has a 10-year history working with these organizations to provide digital literacy skills. As with the community partners, PPH trainers are drawn from the communities it serves, giving the organization the cultural competence essential for engaging nonprofit organizations and vulnerable populations. We have also partnered with the Open Technology Initiative (OTI) of New America Foundation, which has specific expertise in community technology implementation, program design and evaluation, and the BTOP goals and requirements. To achieve the project goals, we will add 250 and upgrade 166 broadband workstations in 25 locations and provide training for the hosts of these computer centers. The training will include A+ certification with follow-up mentorship for as many as 8 people from each host location, up to 225 total trainees, to ensure capacity to maintain the equipment and local network. PPH will conduct a train-the-trainers program at a centrally-located training facility with participants from each partner organization that will yield 75 people with the skills to teach advanced computer literacy courses. In year two, PPH educators will co-teach with these trainees on-site, extending the skills to a further 360 people and firmly embedding the capacity to sustain this training program in each host organization. North Star Fund will provide additional, targeted technical assistance for program participants based on ongoing evaluation conducted by the OTI throughout the grant period. As a targeted investment of equipment and training that imposes no new recurring costs on the partners, this project is eminently sustainable. Partners’ documentation and OTI’s evaluation will make this a replicable model for hard-to-reach urban communities throughout the country. This added technological capacity will strengthen the range of programs already offered by each anchor institution, including basic computer literacy, job training, small business skills, civics and language classes, employment services, community health services, educational services, and neighborhood improvement. In a pre-application survey distributed to North Star’s entire network, partner organizations identified a lack of computer equipment and advanced computer literacy as key limitations to their existing programs. This initiative will address those limitations, as explained by Adhikaar for Human Rights and Social Justice, which serves Nepali immigrants: "We moved to the current location to be able to serve community members with physical disability. Our new community center (and the computer center) within is wheelchair accessible. Currently, the community members who have some knowledge of computer are accessing the computer center. With the expansion, we will able to train community members with no previous computer experience as well. We will also be able to serve more of our community members who have irregular work schedules and cannot come on specific days." Across all partner locations, the upgraded computer centers will be used by 4035 people on a weekly basis, a rate of 209,820 per annum.
The demographic breadth reflects the city's profound need. Populations served will include low-income African Americans and Latinos, and immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, South Asia, Middle East, Pacific Islands and Africa. Languages other than English among these groups include Spanish, French, Haitian Kreyol, Quechua, Mixteco, Cantonese, Mandarin, Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, and Bengali. In some cases, organizations serve specific types of workers, such as street vendors or restaurant workers, or specific low-income groups, such as those living with HIV/AIDS or people who are homeless. Most partners serve whole communities with a range of programming for youth, mothers, families, and seniors. The computer centers are located throughout the city, positioned to be most accessible for their user base, near a demographic cluster in one of the outer boroughs or in an area of Manhattan near public transportation. Organizations that have a geographic focus are in neighborhoods like Red Hook, Brooklyn, where the median household income is approximately a third of the statewide median. With our partners, we estimate this project will result in direct employment for 54 people and induce an additional 25 jobs. North Star Fund and its partners are providing $3,275,647, a 52.8% match including an 8% cash match of the project budget from the New York State Foundation for Science, Technology, and Innovation. We respectfully request a Public Computer Center grant of $2,926,024 to complete this project.