Broadband USA Applications Database

**Applicant Name:** OLIVE HILL COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
**Project Title:** Valdese Public Computer Center  
**Project Type:** Public Computer Center

_______________________ Executive Summary _______________________

This project will provide comprehensive broadband access, academic classes, and training for job-skills development, educational attainment, and business creation to underserved and vulnerable populations in eastern Burke County, an area experiencing high unemployment (over 14 percent), low educational attainment (32.4 percent of adults have not graduated from high school), and poor social service infrastructure. The collapse of manufacturing industries in this region has plunged into poverty many families who previously enjoyed middle-class standards of living. Among the consequences of reduced income are decreased mobility, lower capacity to acquire home computers, and the inability to pay for high-speed broadband services, which generally cost in the neighborhood of $40 per month. The area has experienced large-scale factory closures and low educational attainment for more than a decade and is lacking in public facilities such as a JobLink Center or large public library for job-skill development and public broadband access. Olive Hill Community Economic Development Corporation (CEDC) is a core member of a public-private partnership to redevelop the former Waldensian Mills textile plant in downtown Valdese, North Carolina. In addition to the public computer center, this 70,000-square-foot facility will house a business incubator, a teleconference center, a theater, educational programs, and low- and moderate-income apartments. The public computer center, with 45 workstations and SMART Board technology, will be a key component of the facility and will be a center of worker retraining, business development, educational certification, job seeking, and access to basic services, including tax preparation and bill paying. The center will be conveniently located within walking distance of many distressed neighborhoods and will allow educational programs from the area community college to be offered in a welcoming environment that is viewed as part of the fabric of the local community. The Waldensian Mills plant closed eight years ago and was a major employer for the region. The mill complex is in very good structural condition with an excellent roof, solid walls, and floors supported by steel I-beams. A $400,000 grant to the Town of Valdese from the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center is being used to provide essential facility upgrades, including ADA access ramps, an elevator, bathrooms, and electrical refurbishments. Partners include the applicant, the Town of Valdese, Western Piedmont Community College, and the local Employment Security Commission. The facility is being redeveloped by Airlie LLC, a civic-minded developer focusing on adaptive reuse of factories and small-town revitalization. State support and technical assistance is provided by the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, JobLink, and the area Workforce Development Board. The target geographical area is eastern Burke County, with a year 2000 population of 38,500 over eight census tracts. For the county as a whole, median household income in 2000 was $35,629, with per capita income of $17,397 and a poverty rate of 10.7 percent. The unemployment rate in December 2009 stood
at 14.2 percent, and 32.4 percent of the population had not earned a high school diploma. The public computer center expects to serve 7,500 visits per year from 2,000 individuals from over 800 households. Olive Hill CEDC is an established community organization serving minority and other traditionally disadvantaged populations in Burke County and three adjacent counties. Our mission is 'to positively impact the social, physical, educational, and economic environment of area communities.' We help people increase their income and build assets with three main strategies: small-business ownership and job creation through business development and expansion, home ownership, and financial life skills. We have close relationships with funding organizations, including local and state foundations, state government grant-making entities, and federal programs targeting disadvantaged members of society. We have a full-time staff of five and one part-time administrative assistant. A seven-member board of directors from throughout the community brings a wide range of professional skills to guiding the organization in achieving its mission. Jobs will be created and saved in two important ways. First, the center will support the creation and/or expansion of an estimated six businesses owned and operated by low-income and traditionally disadvantaged individuals, including a recycling and demolition company that is a subsidiary of the applicant. In the first 24 months of operation, approximately 30 to 40 new jobs are expected to be created through business incubation. Second, online skill-development and educational-certification programs will help prepare the general public for re-entering the workforce, maintaining current jobs, or increasing income potential. Each year, more than 300 individuals using the center for broadband-accessed classes from Western Piedmont Community College will find new jobs or retain existing employment. The total cost of the project for a three year period is $576,742, with $448,742 in BTOP grant funds, $70,000 in local cash match, and $58,000 in in-kind support. Project partners will achieve long-term operational sustainability by incorporating the public computer center into Olive Hill CEDC's core operating budget. Post-grant operational funding will come from block grant appropriations to Burke County from the North Carolina Golden LEAF Foundation (as one of the most economically distressed counties in the state, Burke is eligible for $2 million in grants every two years from Golden LEAF) and by establishing programs within the center that receive external financial support from local, state, and federal agencies.