Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: CULTURAL RESOURCES, NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF

Project Title: North Carolina Public Library Computer Centers

Project Type: Public Computer Center

_______________________ Executive Summary ____________________

The State Library of North Carolina (SLNC) is applying for a PCC grant of $1.5M to improve public library connectivity and computing resources across 35 carefully selected counties with unemployment rates well in excess of the national average. These resources are intended to decrease workstation wait times, increase usage time limits, and better support the state's leading employment and workforce development programs. This project leverages SLNC's unique assets and capabilities as the state's support organization for public libraries. North Carolina is facing growing employment challenges amidst a rapidly transitioning state economy. Unemployment has remained persistently high, and despite coordinated statewide efforts, it continues to grow steadily. As the state with the 7th highest unemployment rate in the US, NC's average 2009 unemployment rate was 10.8%, compared to an average 2009 U.S. unemployment rate of 9.3%. As public job search centers scale back their availability due to budget cuts, public libraries are increasingly becoming the main provider of Internet-enabled computers and employment resources for job seekers in NC. In fact, according to the American Library Association (ALA), 70% of NC public libraries report that the library is the only place in their community with free public computer and Internet access services. As unemployment rates climb, public libraries around the state have reported an increase in job seekers using public access computers, particularly as most job listings, applications, and employment services are now available primarily online. In fact, library surveys show an 18% increase in NC public library traffic in fiscal year 2009 over fiscal year 2008. This increased demand for online resources puts a strain on libraries' public access computing capacity and creates bottlenecks on existing Internet connections. However, as state and local budgets are cut in response to the recent economic crisis, most libraries do not have funds to add workstations or upgrade connections. Local librarians, faced with providing employment resources to a growing pool of job seekers, find themselves in need of additional tools and training. In direct response to these growing needs, the project aims to improve public access to online and in-person employment and workforce development resources in 35 particularly hard-hit counties. The SLNC aims to accomplish this through three key activities: 1. Public Internet-Enabled Workstations: The target libraries currently have wait times for Internet workstations of up to 60 minutes and as a result have instituted usage time limits as low as 30 minutes. In fact, 33 target libraries reported usage time limits of 60 minutes or less and 24 libraries reported five or more patrons waiting for computer access during their busiest hours. Since many online job and workforce development resources are more effective when users are able to engage in uninterrupted use, it is our goal to provide enough workstations to each library to reduce wait times and extend usage time limits to enable patrons to fill out job applications. The project would provide 280 laptop computers to 35 public libraries. 2. Internet Connectivity Upgrades: Many target
Libraries will receive connectivity upgrades to accommodate increased patron use of Internet-enabled computers for employment purposes. Current access speeds per workstation among the target libraries range as low as 100 kbps, with download speeds at many locations below the 768 kbps definition of broadband as outlined in the NOFA. We plan to increase speeds in 17 of 35 target libraries to at least 1 Mbps per workstation. This will support webinar training, streaming video, and other bandwidth intensive services, and will sustain libraries’ ability to support online employment services for years to come.

3. Employment Services and Workforce Development: The SLNC has a history of collaboration with other NC entities to address job seekers’ needs by supporting public library staff in their outreach to the unemployed. Leveraging the SLNC’s strong track record in employment-related library services, we plan to develop and provide a range of employment and workforce development resources to public libraries. Local library staff would be trained so they can better support patrons with employment and workforce development services during the grant period and beyond. While the project is focused on 35 select library locations, the employment and workforce development software and databases provided at the state level will be available to all public, academic, and community college libraries across the state. Our project approach will help reduce unemployment in NC by providing job-seekers with public access to a range of online employment and workforce development resources and training. We plan to provide 280 new computers and 17 Internet access upgrades across 35 public libraries. As a result of the upgrades, each week these libraries will be able to serve an additional 10,154 people with state-of-the-art employment and workforce development services. In addition, the project will employ two full-time employees and six trainer contractors and will create five new job-years. The 35 target libraries are located in 35 economically challenged counties selected using 2008-2009 unemployment data (most recent 24-month period). With 2009 average unemployment rates ranging from 11.2% to 16.8%, these counties are the hardest hit areas in NC and include 145,402 unemployed people, 37% of the entire state’s unemployed population. These counties’ annual average unemployment rates have been 1 to 2 percentage points above the national average every year since 2001. Most of these counties (21) contain census blocks that are unserved or underserved by broadband service providers. In addition, 16 of the target counties have been designated as significantly economically distressed and assigned ‘Tier 1’ priority by the NC Department of Commerce. The 35 libraries that would be upgraded, for less than $1.5M in BTOP funds, serve counties with 3.0M citizens (32% of the total state population). Several key vulnerable populations are overrepresented compared to the 32% of NC’s population that the targeted libraries serve, including: 480,746 people in poverty (36% of state total), 577,064 people with disabilities (38% of state total), 67,132 Native Americans (58% of state total), 401,296 elderly over the age of 65 (35% of state total), and 342,494 adults lacking basic literacy skills (36% of state total). In addition, the proposed group serves 535,634 African Americans (27% of state total) and 170,380 Hispanics (28% of state total). Targeting unemployed persons, rather than any specific demographic group, enables the project’s computer and program resources to reach broadly across many vulnerable populations. For the planning and execution of the proposed project the SLNC has collaborated with a number of key partners: - MCNC: The NC middle-mile operator MCNC has an existing operational fiber network (NCREN), approved Round 1 network, and proposed Round 2 network that we expect to utilize extensively for Internet connections to our proposed libraries. - The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF): The BMGF, a highly respected philanthropic organization and long-time supporter of public libraries, has generously agreed to provide extensive funding support for both our application
preparation and BTOP funding cash match. In addition, there are many supporting partners whose participation and endorsement will be important to the project's success, including Golden LEAF, the NC Employment Security Commission, the NC Department of Commerce, the NC Community College System, and a wide variety of local partners. Finally, the partnering target libraries are the only established community anchors in well-known, often central, locations in each one of the NC counties with the greatest concentration of unemployed people. In many communities, the libraries are the only source of free public Internet access and have been forced to ration service due to an adverse combination of budget cuts and increased patron demand. Besides Internet access, NC libraries offer a range of existing programs and have an extensive track record of providing nationally recognized employment services. Local librarians will be supported by experienced SLNC staff that have repeatedly proven their ability to effectively manage and administer federal and private grant programs. The SLNC successfully manages over $4M annually in federal and private grants for libraries. The project budget also includes a grant administrator, employment services manager, IT support firm, and E-Rate training for participating libraries in order to ensure project sustainability following the conclusion of the BTOP funding period.