Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: NIAGARA, COUNTY OF

Project Title: Western New York Public Computer Center Project

Project Type: Public Computer Center

_______________________ Executive Summary _____________________

A. Statement of the problem or need: The Buffalo-Niagara Region, which includes Erie and Niagara Counties, is located in the northwestern corner of NY State. The Region, whose population centers include the Cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls, borders major waterways such as Lake Ontario, Lake Erie, and the Niagara River as well as the international border between the United States and Canada. Niagara County is seeking funding to implement the Western New York Public Computer Centers Project. Through this project Niagara County will increase broadband accessibility to vulnerable populations through partnerships with public computer centers at anchor institutions and within municipalities. It will address several major problems affecting the Buffalo-Niagara Region, including high rates of unemployment and limited broadband capabilities at public computer centers. The Buffalo-Niagara Region has suffered years of public disinvestment and economic hardship. According to statistics compiled by the NY State Department of Labor, the unemployment rate in the Buffalo-Niagara Region has increased from 5.6% in 2007 to 9.2% in 2010. It is estimated that the Buffalo-Niagara Region lost 6,100 private-sector jobs in the last year alone. Like many other areas of the country, the vocational trend in the Buffalo-Niagara Region is moving away from manufacturing jobs to more technologically based employment. As a result, there is a significant need to provide increased access to digital literacy and basic computer skill education for residents. To meet these demands, Niagara County is partnering with NIOGA Library System, the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, Niagara County Community College (NCCC), Niagara County Employment & Training Center, St. Peters Lutheran School, Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center (NFMMC), and the Towns of Wheatfield, Lewiston, and Village of Middleport for the creation of the Western New York Public Computer Centers Project. The goal of this project is to enrich career and employment opportunities, expand access to online services, and enhance technology skill-training opportunities for at-risk and underserved populations in the Buffalo-Niagara Region. Additionally, there is widespread need throughout the Region to increase broadband capabilities, as many anchor institutions currently do not offer broadband access, or only offer broadband on a limited basis. For example, NFMMC, the County’s premier health network, does not offer wireless broadband to hospital patients, nursing home residents, visitors in the hospital, or to support agencies that assist in abuse cases for the Medical Center’s Child Advocacy Center.

B. Overall approach to addressing needs: The Project is a collaborative approach to addressing priority needs such as high rates of unemployment, limited broadband accessibility at public computer centers and community anchor institutions, and the urgent need for new commercial investment and tourism. Through this project, Niagara County will form a partnership with nine agencies located within the Buffalo-Niagara Region. Project partners include: Niagara County Employment & Training; NFMMC; NIOGA Library System and Lockport Public...
Library; St. Peters Lutheran School; Buffalo & Erie County Public Library; NCCC; and the Towns of Wheatfield, Lewiston, and Village of Middleport. This partnership approach will ensure that the Project will increase public broadband accessibility for employment searches and digital literacy education and will strengthen the ability of anchor institutions to serve the Buffalo-Niagara Region (please refer to the 'Partners Description' section of the application for full Project details). Through the proposed Project, Niagara County and its nine project partners will replace 87 current outdated workstations, will add 39 new broadband workstations, will increase broadband connection speed from an average of 10.5MBps to 26.7MBps, will increase weekday access at public computer centers by an average of 29 hours per week and weekend access by an average of 11 hours per weekend. C. Areas to be served; population of the target areas and estimated number of potential users: The proposed project will provide broadband accessibility in the following areas in the Buffalo-Niagara Region: City of Buffalo; City of Niagara Falls; City and Town of Lockport; Town of Wheatfield; Town of Lewiston and Village of Middleport. The total population in the target area is 422,433, of which approximately 40% are considered a 'vulnerable population.' Several communities in the target area have a low per capita income, as well as a high number of individuals living below the poverty line. According to the Census Bureau, the City of Niagara Falls has a population of 55,593 residents. The per capita income for the City of Niagara Falls is $15,721 compared to the NY State average of $23,389 and the national average of $21,587. Additionally, 19.5% of individuals in the City of Niagara Falls live below the poverty line compared to the NY State average of 11.5% and the National average of 12.4%. The City of Lockport has a population of 22,279 residents. The per capita income for the City of Lockport is $19,620 compared to the NY State average of $23,389 and the national average of $21,587. Additionally, 13.3% of individuals in the City of Lockport live below the poverty line compared to the NY State average of 11.5% and the National average of 12.4%. The City of Buffalo has a population of 292,648 residents. The per capita income for the City of Buffalo is $14,991 compared to the NY State average of $23,389 and the national average of $21,587. Additionally, 26.6% of individuals in the City of Buffalo live below the poverty line compared to the NY State average of 11.5% and the National average of 12.4%. The target area also includes a significant disabled population. Specifically, 25.2% of residents in the City of Niagara Falls are disabled, 18.7% of residents in the City of Lockport are disabled, and 26.2% of residents in the City of Buffalo are disabled. D. Qualifications of the applicant that demonstrate the ability to implement the project: Niagara County is fully qualified to implement the proposed project. The Project Director, Larry Helwig, has been the Niagara County Director of Data Processing since 1998. Niagara County Data Processing oversees the computer needs of all County Departments. Mr. Helwig has experience implementing several grant-funded broadband related programs. For example, in 2005, Niagara County received funding through the New York State Community Capital Assistance Program to create WiFi locations in Niagara County. Since its successful implementation, Niagara County continues to manage this project and contributes ongoing annual operating and maintenance fees of approximately $4,800. For the 2005 WiFi project, Niagara County Data Processing was responsible for applying for funds and managing project costs including purchases and fulfilling the implementation timeframe. Additionally, Niagara County has assembled a team of Project partners that have extensive experience in implementing broadband and/or technology related projects. For example, NIOGA Library System has received and successfully implemented grants from the New York State Department of Education Public Library Construction program, the Annual Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) Summer Reading Program and various legislative member item
programs. NCCC successfully completed a federal US Dept of Education Title III Strengthening Institutions project in 2009. The Title III grant project allowed the college to successfully implement Smart Classroom technology across the campus, investing almost $2 million in technology upgrades. The Buffalo & Erie County Public Library has demonstrated ongoing successful grant partnerships with such organizations as the Gates Foundation and successfully implements e-Rate funding each year. During 2009-2010, the Library's IT staff administered the Opportunities Online Hardware Grant for eleven eligible libraries with a grant value of $221,000. E. Jobs to be saved or created: The proposed project will create a total of five new jobs, including one part-time Western New York Public Computer Centers Project Manager, one full-time NIOGA Library System CyberTrain Instructor, one full-time Buffalo & Erie County Public Library full-time Tech Specialist and two part-time Tech Specialists. The proposed project will ensure retention of at least eighteen existing jobs, which are critical to carrying out key components of the project and achieving project goals within the proposed timeframe. F. Overall cost of the proposed project and total request: The overall cost of the proposed project is $1,187,349.00 and the total project request is $755,106.00.