Montana is the 4th largest state in the union based on geographic area, yet it has less than one million people living within its borders. Low population density creates a situation that makes broadband service uneconomical or prohibitively expensive to many consumers. In a Q3 2009 report titled, 'The State of the Internet’, Akamai ranks Montana 50th (out of 51) in broadband penetration, with only 34% of connections having broadband speeds. It is clear that in terms of broadband penetration, Montana ranks among the lowest in the United States. Montana's overall population density averages 7 people per square mile. Population densities in the areas served by Montana’s most rural libraries can reach as low as .027 people per square mile. This is remarkably rural relative to the overall United States which has a population density greater than 80 people per square mile. In these rural Montana towns, libraries are often the only feasible source of broadband Internet access for miles surrounding the community. Unfortunately, many Montana libraries face workstation congestion and slow Internet connection speeds and therefore cannot serve their patrons effectively. Our project seeks to address Montana's needs by providing more public access computers and faster broadband connections to Montana's public libraries. After extensive communication with all public libraries in Montana, we selected 42 to participate in our project based on 1) the demonstrated need of the library and surrounding geography, 2) their ability and willingness to sustain investments in their computing center, 3) their ability and willingness to sustain increases in broadband service, and 4) their ability to adhere to BTOP reporting requirements. While some libraries were not included, MSL hopes to address these libraries' needs through future grant opportunities and, potentially, through increased budget expenditures from the state over time. Our project will make sustainable broadband enhancements available to 86% of the Montana population. We will achieve this by increasing average facility broadband speeds at participating libraries to 21 mbps. We will also cut computing center wait times in half by increasing the total number of workstations from 439 to 634 and by increasing library operation hours by 5% overall. Our project will provide improved access to the disabled through a combination of ADA recommended software, hardware, and furniture, and through minor construction projects aimed at increasing accessibility of computing center facilities. We plan to increase computer literacy by offering a combination of face-to-face and online courses for librarians and patrons. To extend the reach of our project to include citizens living far away from existing computing center locations, MSL plans to build a mobile computer lab in partnership with Missoula Public Library. The mobile computing lab will serve as a model for other large libraries interested in increasing their reach into the most rural communities. To raise awareness of our project, we have developed a robust outreach program designed to emphasize the investments that will be made through our project. Through our project we expect to increase the
number of patrons that use computing centers on a weekly basis from 17,487 to 25,693. This translates into 426,728 additional user visits per year. The total cost of our project is less than $2.7M and includes a combined 32% grant match from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Missoula Public Library, administration staff at the MSL, and several smaller participant libraries. We estimate our project will create a total of 43 job years. The 42 libraries participating in our project serve 29 counties, covering approximately 827,916 people or roughly 86% of the Montana population. Within this area, there are several vulnerable populations for whom we have taken specific steps to ensure we serve effectively. These vulnerable populations include low income, disabled, Native Americans, elderly and youth. Median household income in the 29 counties we plan to serve averages $43,265. This compares to a US average of $50,740. 17 of the 29 counties have median household incomes at 80% or less of the US average. By enhancing computer service, providing robust training, and expanding government partnerships, we hope to increase the populations' access to technology and government services. In addition, 15.8% of Montanans in the 29 counties we will serve are living with disabilities. To engage this population we will offer a variety of disability-friendly workstation configurations at our libraries, and will fund minor construction projects to increase the accessibility of the computing centers. Further, Native Americans comprise 4.8% of the total population. This compares to a US average of only 1.0%. We are serving Native Americans by investing in libraries situated on and near tribal reservations, and which have a large number of Native American patrons. 14% of the population in the counties we are serving are over the age of 65. We have ensured outreach to this population through our partnership with AARP Montana. Our partnership includes providing volunteer opportunities for seniors at computing centers. 23% of people in the counties we are serving are under 18 years of age. To address this group, we will expand distance learning opportunities through our partnership with the Montana Digital Academy, and provide children's workstations aimed at improving youth literacy and familiarity with computer technology. Taken as a whole, our project creates a resource that will empower state and local organizations, allowing them to extend the reach of their services to those in the most need. To ensure this happens effectively, MSL has formed partnerships with organizations across the public sector, private sector, and local community to ensure investments in public library computing centers translate into improved well being for Montanans. We have established partnerships with the Montana Digital Academy (MTDA), the Montana Supreme Court, AARP Montana, Montana Department of Labor and Industry (DLI) Workforce Services Division, the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS), and the Census and Economic Information Center (CEIC). The management team of Montana State Library has the breadth of experience and local perspective necessary to execute the proposed project effectively. Beginning in 1956 with the passage of the federal Library Services Act, MSL assumed its administrative role as a financial and library development conduit for support of public libraries. Since then, MSL has a long history of managing similar projects aimed at supporting Montana's libraries funded through the Library Service and Construction Act (LSCA), the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), and its relationship with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. During 30 years of administering LSCA funding, MSL leveraged over $10 million in federal funding to impact the library needs of Montana communities. For six consecutive years under LSTA, MSL expended approximately $150,000 per year providing broadband development and access support for libraries. Under the current, core management team, MSL has assumed responsibility for management and oversight of numerous Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation projects including the Gates State Partnership Grant
($801,233), Gates Staying Connected Grant ($198,720), Gates Public Access Computing Hardware Upgrade Grant ($295,500) and Gates Rural Library Sustainability Grant ($31,650). MSL has the proven grant management and reporting experience, project management experience, fiscal and accounting systems, and experienced staff to successfully, implement, manage, and sustain its proposed BTOP PCC project.