The AIM Institute seeks to implement the Nebraska Broadband Response (NeBR) Initiative to serve the employment and training needs of vulnerable populations residing in East Omaha and the 11-county area comprising the Nebraska Panhandle. As the enclosed proposal will show, a disproportionate number of residents in these areas are unemployed, underemployed and/or live in poverty. Educational attainment in these areas is also low ' limiting job prospects for those seeking employment, recently laid off, or incumbent workers seeking advancement into higher wage positions. Further, despite the great need within the communities, there is still a relative lack of employment and training services that promote training and education. The community of East Omaha represents the most diverse and densely populated community in the state. With a total population of 202,371, East Omaha represents more than 10% of the state's total population. East Omaha includes a downtown area surrounded to the north and south by older neighborhoods that have experienced decreasing property values, increased crime rates, and shifting demographics. Unemployment in the area is historically much higher than state and national averages, and a disproportionate percentage of the area's residents rely on public assistance. In fact, of the 80,480 families in the area, nearly one in every five (19%) have incomes below the poverty level, significantly higher than the state rate of 11% and the national rate of 13% (American Community Survey, 2008). The Panhandle region is an 11-county contiguous area comprising the state's western border. Not unlike many rural communities, the area is populated largely by Caucasians, relies heavily on agriculture and related industries, and has experienced significant population loss and brain drain over the past thirty years. Currently, the 11-county area has a total population of 85,813, which represents a 5% decrease in population since 2000. Given the lack of population density in the Panhandle (no single community with more than 15,000), training and education opportunities are sparse and typically centered in Scottsbluff or Chadron ' the region's two largest cities ' leaving those remote areas of the panhandle largely underserved. A 2008 report issued by the Pew Research Center found that while broadband adoption rates have risen in recent years, underserved populations continue to lag behind their more well-to-do counterparts when it comes to broadband adoption. The study found that 55% of all Americans currently have broadband service in their homes. However, when looking at the rates of minority, poor and rural populations, the rates are significantly lower with only 43% of African Americans, 25% of low-income populations (median incomes of $20,000 or less) and 38% of rural populations (Horrigan) having broadband within their homes. Further, given the lack of infrastructure in many rural and impoverished communities, community-based access to broadband and Internet resources often fail to meet the high demand, leaving these populations severely underserved. Through the proposed project, the AIM Institute and its partners (Western Nebraska Community
College, the University of Nebraska Lincoln Cooperative Extension and the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce Cornstalks Entrepreneurship Program) will utilize a broadband platform to serve the employment needs of two distinct areas of the state. Utilizing broadband technology, the AIM Institute will implement a cost-effective prototype, replicable in other parts of the country, where issues of cultural and rural isolation, lacking broadband access and other factors limit the availability of workforce training and education for vulnerable populations. A total of three labs will be used to provide the broadband-enabled training and education proposed through the Nebraska Broadband Response. This will include two stationary labs, with one situated in the heart of East Omaha and another situated in Scottsbluff on the campus of Western Nebraska Community College. In addition to these sites, a portable training lab will also be used to serve remote areas of the Panhandle. Training to be offered will encompass a wide range of topics of interest to unemployed, underemployed and incumbent workers as well as the self-employed. This will include customized short-term job training and skill-specific training, occupational soft skills training, employability training, computer literacy, and entrepreneurship. A distinct feature of the project is the array of training to be offered. Ranging from basic computer literacy and soft skills trainings to customized skill-specific training, the project will offer a training to meet the varying needs of target populations. In delivering content in each of the five areas, the AIM Institute will work with a number of partner organizations to leverage existing resources, provide guidance and leadership, and minimize duplication. Leveraging the career assessments and career exploration resources contained in its careerlink.com site, the AIM Institute will also offer participants an array of virtual trainings, educational opportunities, and online resources for project participants. Training platforms will include asynchronous and synchronous formats, as well as instructor-led, computer-facilitated instruction. A nonprofit consortium of regional businesses, educational institutions and community-based agencies, the AIM Institute was founded in 1991 to promote technology's expanding role within the region. The AIM Institute works extensively with education, government and industry in designing innovative curriculum and applied work experiences to ensure an educated workforce. It has a successful track record of managing complex grant-funded projects and sustaining these projects beyond grant funding, including projects funded by the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Department of Commerce, the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the U.S. Department of State. One such grant resulted in the development of careerlink.com – the region's largest job posting site, while another grant, from the National Science Foundation, helped establish the Midwest center for Information Technology, a regional collaboration of AIM and 10 community colleges designed to enhance IT education across the region's community colleges. Nebraska Broadband Response will have profound impact on vulnerable populations within the target areas. Using the ARRA job estimator, it is anticipated that Nebraska Broadband Response will create 16 jobs, and directly/indirectly induced affect 20 additional jobs. With a broad array of trainings serving more than 13 Nebraska counties, it is anticipated that 10,250 individuals will be served each year of the project, with a minimum of 30,750 individuals served over the course of the grant. Given the funding request of $1,482,223, this equates to a cost of only $48 per participant. Given the tax revenue generated by each job created or saved, coupled with the reduction in the cost of public assistance, this project represents a low-cost solution to a pressing need within the state.