The State of Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) and the Illinois State Library (ISL) will partner with 92 local libraries to expand the network of public computer centers that provide broadband access, technology training and other educational services to vulnerable Illinois residents. Statement of the problem: There is a need to provide broadband access and technology training to residents of unserved and underserved communities in Illinois. Today's workplace increasingly relies on technology, and individuals lacking computer skills and regular access to broadband face mounting obstacles in a competitive job market. Not only does this growing 'digital divide' threaten to place low-income citizens even further behind in the job market, but it also jeopardizes the nation's economy. Everyone 'regardless of where they live' must have access to broadband technology to improve their skills and keep Illinois and the United States competitive in a technology-based 21st-century global economy. Overall approach to addressing the need: The State of Illinois has a longstanding history of supporting public computer centers under the Eliminate the Digital Divide Program (30 ILCS 780). The goal of this program is to develop a technologically-trained workforce in every community, to the benefit of all Illinois residents and businesses. DCEO administers this competitive grant program that supports public computer centers throughout the state that provide access to broadband and computer literacy training for low-income, vulnerable populations. Since the program inception in 2000, DCEO has awarded more than 800 grants totaling over $33 million, to public computer centers serving vulnerable, low-income populations throughout the state. Illinois libraries are eligible to apply under the Eliminate the Digital Divide Program, however, the majority of the state grants are awarded to nonprofit community organizations. The ARRA provides a historic opportunity for DCEO to partner with the Illinois State Library to expand the network of Illinois public computer centers that provide sustainable broadband access and technology training programs. Through this historic collaboration between DCEO and the Illinois State Library, the State of Illinois intends to create a best-practice, nationally recognized model in providing world-class broadband access, technology training and educational programming. The purpose of this proposal is to make needed equipment, training and services available to public computer centers in libraries across Illinois to enhance the provision of broadband-delivered education, employment and reading services to the public and vulnerable populations, including the unemployed, children, seniors, minorities and persons with disabilities. The project will expand the reach and impact of the Illinois Digital Divide Program and support the fundamental goals of the Illinois State Library that include providing the best available technology and expanding opportunities for vulnerable people who have difficulty using services. Libraries across Illinois are addressing increased demands for computer access by the unemployed, the disabled and adult
literacy students. With more than 11% unemployment statewide, the economic slowdown has led to increased demands for online library services. Libraries throughout the state are committed to meeting special demands for employment information, literacy training, legal information and access to digital books by the blind and physically handicapped. The Illinois State Library will coordinate sustainable public computer center programming at 92 libraries throughout the State. The State Library's strategic plan recognizes that Illinois' libraries have dedicated and committed staff who administer innovative programs. Although Illinois has a strong statewide network, the current recession and state fiscal crisis has resulted in an inability to consistently fund technology development including broadband access, computer equipment and technology training programs. The strategic goals of the Illinois State Library are in clear alignment with the Eliminate the Digital Divide Program and the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP). The Illinois BTOP project will complement Illinois' unique strengths and provide new opportunities to collaborate and develop innovative approaches in serving the people of Illinois. 

Area(s) to be served: Illinois is a large and geographically diverse state consisting of a land area of 55,582 square miles. The 92 libraries participating in the Illinois BTOP public computer center project will provide broadband access, technology training, and educational services to vulnerable populations in rural, urban, and suburban communities located throughout the State. Just two substantive indicators of the vulnerability of the populations the 92 library Public Computer Centers (PCCs) will serve are the population of children in the school districts where the PCCs are located who are eligible for free lunches and those eligible for free or reduced rate lunches. Out of a total student population of 312,222, 39 percent (120,977) are eligible for free lunches and 46 percent (144,722) are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch. Additionally, a quick review of the unemployment statistics for these same communities reveals that the current Median unemployment rate is approaching a staggering 11%. Four of the communities have an unemployment rate exceeding 14%. 

Qualifications: The State of Illinois has the administrative infrastructure that is required of a project that demands results and transparency. DCEO and the Illinois State Library are uniquely positioned to coordinate this statewide project. DCEO is the lead economic development agency responsible for improving Illinois' competitiveness in the global economy. DCEO has administered the Eliminate the Digital Divide Grant Program for more than 8 years, and annually awards grants to more than 100 public computer centers. The Illinois State Library will also play an essential role in ensuring that this program is efficiently and effectively implemented and sustained at the local level. All local libraries have identified qualified and dedicated staff to operate the public computer center and implement the training programs outlined in this proposal. Jobs to be saved or created: It is projected that the additional capacity building this project anticipates will increase the PCCs ability to serve an additional 48,276 persons with broadband access, basic computer training, and educational programming. Part of this educational training will be aimed specifically at assisting those who are unemployed and underemployed with a variety of services that will prepare them to reenter the job market or to advance to a better position. In a recent Digital Divide Grant Application from the ISL, they projected that of 29,500 training participants who go through their computer training curriculum 17,770 will be 'successful completers'. Of those, it is projected that 8,550 will transition to 'advanced educational programs' and 8,550 will transition to 'workforce training programs'. Of the total number of training participants the ISL anticipates that 5,900 will enter a computer-related job after training with an average placement wage of $40,000. Although it isn't clear exactly the job impact of this PCC proposal, it is a fair assumption that if these numbers hold, then 5,900 of the original 29,500
training participants or fully 20% are projected to wind up in 'computer-related jobs'. So, since it is anticipated that the PCC's will be serving an additional 48,276 persons with some level of service related to broadband access, it is also safe to assume that a significant percentage of those receiving services will be successful in their employment searches. Overall cost: The total project cost is $6,058,727 of which, the State of Illinois has committed $1,000,000 in cash match from the Eliminate the Digital Divide Program and local partners are contributing $861,230.