Applicant Name: PUGET SOUND CENTER FOUNDATION FOR TEACHING, LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGY, THE

Project Title: Stimulating Broadband-Enabled Economic Growth in Underserved Washington Communities

Project Type: Sustainable Broadband Adoption

_______________________ Executive Summary _______________________

For many years Washington's poorest communities, especially in rural areas, have experienced double-digit unemployment rates. In an effort to address historically high unemployment and poverty rates in rural communities, Washington joined seven other northern states in 2003 to participate in the Horizons poverty reduction and community leadership development program funded by the Northwest Area Foundation (NWAF). Since that time, Washington State University (WSU) Extension has administered the Horizons Program in 40 Washington communities. The populations of Horizons communities range from 279 to 4949. 37 communities are in counties with double-digit unemployment. Over the life of Washington Horizons, 22 communities have exceeded the 20% poverty rate with 5 above 30%. The average poverty rate among current Horizons communities in all eight states is 18.47%, the average among Washington Horizons communities is 20.08%. In the fall of 2007 WSU surveyed residents in 22 Washington Horizons communities to assess community satisfaction, to identify quality of life issues and priority concerns. Responses consistently identified 'more and better jobs' as the most important need in their communities. These communities are among the most difficult to reach and expensive to serve with public interventions to help reduce poverty and improve employment. The sustained high poverty and unemployment rates among the 40 Washington Horizon communities have many root causes. However, among the most significant cause is a lack of available local employment, local opportunities consist often largely of low-paying jobs. Limited markets for new businesses and limited workforce talent typically characterize these communities. Local government institutions including law enforcement agencies, fire departments and others are financially stretched, which limits their ability to offer competitive salaries and provide necessary continuing education. This has the long-term effect of greatly reducing local public safety and government agency capacity to hire and retain the most qualified workers, thereby creating public safety risks. With state budget challenges, already cash-strapped local public safety organizations are at even greater risk. Growing health worker shortages and challenges in providing continuing education to hospital and healthcare workers in rural Washington is adding to this systemic stress on local populations, especially for those living on limited income who depend on the future viability of local hospitals as their primary source of medical care. While the challenge is great, the expanded subscription, use and adoption of broadband to enhance workforce and workplace capabilities have the potential to provide significant leverage towards the solution to all of these problems. The expanded availability of broadband by itself, however, is not adequate. What is needed in addition to availability is a systematic broadband awareness and adoption training effort of
the type offered by this proposal. EdLab Group, in partnership with WSU's Division of Governmental Studies and Services and VisionTech360 Inc. represents a unique team offering specialized skills and resources grounded in extensive experience working with rural Washington communities in the design and implementation of broadband-enabled economic development solutions. This proposing team will engage and work with key stakeholders to address the twin problems of chronic poverty and unemployment in rural Washington through the application of appropriate broadband-enabled strategies. The Horizons Program, in particular, will provide an excellent vehicle to increase digital technology awareness and training leading to expanded subscription and the greater use and productive adoption of broadband by employers and residents in the underserved and rural communities of Washington. The specialized broadband awareness and training curriculum and technical assistance approach developed through this project will provide a model for expansion to other communities in Washington and in other states. This project is designed to reduce poverty by expanding both workplace and workforce adoption and use of broadband beginning with 40 or more of Washington’s most economically vulnerable communities by providing a targeted broadband awareness education and support structure to improve broadband subscription, use, and adoption among the residents, community institutions (hospitals, local government, law enforcement, etc.) and businesses in these vulnerable rural communities. Specific broadband adoption metrics are included in the project to measure progress in the adoption and use of broadband to achieve targeted improvements in local workforce capability and the leveraging of broadband to provide local workers and business owners with more economic opportunity through adoption of telework, e-commerce and other measures. Projected new subscribers total 800 plus 400 new users at public computing centers. The 40 Washington communities initially targeted by this project have been identified not only on the basis of a high need, but also for their level of ‘readiness’ to be successful because of their engagement with the Horizons program. The NWAF has already invested more than $5.5 million over the past eight years in poverty reduction efforts and leadership capacity development in these 40 Washington communities. The intensive broadband-enabled workforce and workplace training and support approach developed for these 40 communities will result in a specialized open-content curriculum that can be made available to economically vulnerable communities in Washington and beyond. Expansion in Washington will include 10 communities previously been funded by WSU's successful Community Technology Opportunity Program (CTOP) and up to 40 additional communities included in our companion proposal submitted under this solicitation for the Communities Connect Network (CCN, Easy Grant ID# 5209). The project will directly engage traditional anchor institutions including hospitals, schools, local government offices, and others. However, an innovative contrast to many traditionally-conceived broadband adoption outreach initiatives, this project will leverage several already established networks as effective conduits to serve needy populations for example: WSU Horizons project, CTOP grantee network, community technology providers identified in the CCN proposal (ID# 5209). There are nearly 30,000 individuals who have already been touched by the existing WSU Horizons program, over 1000 of whom will be directly and immediately impacted by the proposed training and networking activities. These include tribal, Hispanic and other minority populations. The 10 existing CTOP community technology providers have already engaged more than 3000 of Washington’s most underserved individuals, many of whom may also benefit from the training provided through this proposed project. In addition, the 40 community technology organizations identified in the companion CCN proposal (CCN ID #5209) are home to
thousands more poor and underserved individuals, all of whom are potential beneficiaries under this proposed program once the on-line workforce and workplace curriculum is launched. The project will provide opportunities to expand subscription, adoption and use of broadband to advance both workforce and workplace solutions directly impacting economic growth in communities with high poverty and unemployment rates. Examples of workforce solutions include such things as: 1) access to continuing education and work-skill training, or 2) expanding personal employment opportunities which better match skills through working part-time or full-time for employers in distant locations. Examples of workplace solutions include 1) expanding market potential through use of e-commerce, or 2) attracting and retaining critical workers through adoption of telework. The outreach goals of this project will be addressed in four phases: Content Development, Delivery Testing, Program Launch and Sustainability Measures. These phases are more fully described later in this application. This project is expected to directly retain or create an estimated 400 jobs among 40 economically rural communities in Washington with a budget of $2,556,958. This works out to be approximately $6,400 per job, a significantly lower figure than the OMB formula of $92,000-per-1-year-job. An estimated 2 additional indirect jobs for each direct job created or retained are anticipated providing a total economic impact of over 1200 jobs or retained over five years in Washington's most economically vulnerable communities. The potential economic impact will be even greater when the subexpanded use of the developed on-line curriculum is replicated through other existing networks including CCN and CTOP and several other broadband planning efforts in other states by VisionTech360,Inc.