Executive Summary

Louisiana faces many critical social challenges. Statistics reveal that we have an unhealthy and poorly educated citizenry with a high incarceration rate. Although we have a rich cultural heritage, we lack the culture of literacy needed for our people to be successful. Until we build a literate society and a society with the 21st century skills required to be employed in a modern workforce, these problems will continue to plague us. In today's global economy, access to broadband is a necessity for success and should be available to all. This proposal will (1) establish 17 public computer centers in community colleges, (2) offer high end technology training statewide, (3) rebuild the local area network infrastructures of 340 public libraries and create a system of remote support for all libraries in the state, and (4) add additional assistive technology workstations to the 64 parish libraries and community college computer centers. We seek to reduce the digital and educational divide that we know exists in Louisiana and that keeps many of our citizens vulnerable and disenfranchised. The service area is all 64 parishes (counties) in the state. Philosophically we deeply believe that public libraries and community colleges have both an opportunity and a responsibility to change Louisiana's standings in the most important indicators of success. By engaging our citizens from the neediest socioeconomic groups, we can better equip them with the tools they need to be happy, to succeed, and to compete for jobs. We believe doing this will bring about the economic development that will allow Louisiana to compete on a global stage. We see our diversity as a strength, we believe in the spirit of our people, and we want to take our place as a partner in their success. In Louisiana last year, we saw over 7,300,000 uses of computers in public libraries, which clearly demonstrates that people do not have broadband or computers in their homes. The 2008 NTIA list of broadband adoption rates shows Louisiana at 11th from the bottom. 57.1% of households in Louisiana are without broadband access, either because it is not available or because it is unaffordable. When you tie this factor to our low standing in most indicators of success, our children born into areas of poverty are almost certain to fail and repeat the cycle they were born into. Some of our most telling indicators are: 'As many as 20% of Louisiana's adults are non-literate and not able to read simple instructions. 'More than 18% of our population lives below the poverty level. The national average is 13.6%. 'America's Health Rankings, 2008 ranked Louisiana # 50 & in the bottom 2 positions since 1990. 'Louisiana ranks # 3 in obesity. 'Louisiana is #1 in the number of cancer deaths per 100,000 population. 'Louisiana ranks 5th highest in the nation in crime rate per 100,000 population. 'In 2008 the labor force participation rate for Louisiana was 59.4%. The national average is 63.4%. 'Over 17,000 legally blind and more than 57,000 seriously visually impaired Louisianans cannot read standard print. 'Approximately 26%, or over 1.13 million, of Louisiana's 4.3 million residents are
individuals with disabilities or functional limitations, including some 493,660 persons over the age of 64. Community colleges and public libraries are integral in improving these statistics in Louisiana. Public libraries already offer free broadband access, but the community colleges now can only serve their students, faculty, and staff. By establishing public computer centers in 17 community and technical colleges, we can expand the broadband access into areas where the libraries cannot reach and introduce more citizens of the state to broadband. Many of our rural areas are seeing more opportunities for faster broadband. A recent BTOP grant awarded to the state will bring fiber to Louisiana's Delta region which encompasses the poorest and most rural parishes in the state, but because of lack of funding and a skilled workforce of IT professionals, most of our rural libraries in underserved areas cannot take advantage of faster broadband because their systems cannot handle the increased load. This proposal rebuilds their internal networks to prepare them for speeds of 100 mbps at every parish (county) headquarters. Another portion of this proposal establishes a centralized automated network of remote and onsite support that will allow usage of the same resources and functions from small rural, as well as large urban, libraries. An additional area addressed in this proposal is to offer high end technology training (Microsoft, Cisco, and CompTIA A+ series of certifications) in areas of the state where there is little, if any, technology training. This uniform curriculum of training, education and certification for any Louisianans involved in maintenance of information systems will strengthen the state's workforce and will ensure that any person entering a rural public library can get the same level of service as someone entering a large, urban library. Our overall goal is to provide the same opportunities for advancement to rural and underserved populations that exist in more affluent areas. Soft skills training such as interviewing and resume writing and basic computer training will also be provided at the community colleges with this grant. These classes in addition to those provided by the public libraries through our first grant (#1397) will offer citizens multiple opportunities for workforce and educational development. This proposal is scalable and replicable. The overall BTOP investment that would bring Louisiana into parity with the rest of the nation is $19,637,265 and will be matched by in kind donations of $9,433,704 (32.5%). This will directly contribute to the education of the Louisiana workforce, provide greater access to broadband and make Louisianans more employable. The public libraries in Louisiana are very heavily used, but are funded by dedicated property taxes that, in the rural areas of the state, amount to a very small operating budget. They are routinely in need of more funding, more staffing, and newer equipment. The State Library of Louisiana has worked diligently to build upon and sustain the public library networks but with 340 outlets, this is a challenge. With Louisiana facing the same financial crisis as the rest of the nation, our economic outlook remains bleak for several years. We are fearful that we will lose the momentum we have gained in the past 4 years. The Louisiana Community & Technical College System has also faced major budget cuts and expects more in the years to come. This is despite the fact that enrollment has increased dramatically. A project of the size and scope of our application will not be possible without BTOP funding. The State Library and Louisiana Community & Technical College System will work in partnership with state government, local government, and all news media including Louisiana Public Broadcasting to inform potential users of the training opportunities we will be offering. This media campaign will especially focus in on entities that serve the underserved, such as the Louisiana Workforce Commission (Louisiana's Department of Labor), to ensure that we are reaching our target audience.