Applicant Name: METHODIST HOSPITALS, INC., THE

Project Title: Methodist Hospitals' Community Network (MH ComNet)

Project Type: Comprehensive Community Infrastructure

Executive Summary

The Methodist Hospitals' Community Network (MH ComNet) project, a 158-mile sustainable middle-mile fiber network, will connect three hospitals and 275 anchor institutions, deliver innovative telemedicine, education and work-force training services, support public safety and emergency management, and bolster economic and job-development efforts in financially depressed communities in northwest Indiana. A not-for-profit healthcare system, Methodist Hospitals, located in Gary and Merrillville, Indiana, is the paragon of a community anchor—a major local employer (more than 2,300 employees) and a healthcare provider of last resort that last year provided charity service to uninsured patients at a cost of $48 million. As the City of Gary has suffered economically—including a 12 percent loss of population since 1990, a 50 percent City budget cut over the past three years, a marked increase in unemployment (almost doubled since 2000), and soaring poverty rates (25.8 percent)—Methodist has become even more essential to the community. The Hospitals are the center of a broad medical network that increasingly does more with less, because so many of its customers are not able to pay. Methodist Hospitals is committed to providing healthcare to the total community, serving all patients regardless of their financial circumstances. MH ComNet will enable Methodist and its partner, the Northwest Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC), to provide expanded services to medically underserved minority urban and rural communities; create a high-capacity regional telemedicine communications link for transporting health-related data; support electronic medical records; and establish a robust broadband infrastructure linking a range of public and private partners to deliver educational, job training, and emergency services, and economic development benefits to the area’s vulnerable populations.

Methodist has deep experience with operating communications networks and information technology. Using its considerable internal technical capacity and capabilities—including an IT staff of 47 and a fully redundant, SAS 70-certified network operations center—Methodist will build and operate a 158-mile public-private middle-mile fiber network covering a wide swath of northwest Indiana encompassing Gary, Merrillville, and Crown Point. MH ComNet will link three hospital campuses, 110 community clinics, physician offices and pharmacies with managed Ethernet fiber. It will also include considerable extra fiber capacity to provide lit service or dark fiber connections (meeting the BTOP nondiscrimination and interconnection obligations) to three local governments and other key anchor institutions, central to the area’s quality of life and economy, including 31 government facilities, 11 libraries, 31 public safety facilities, 69 schools (K-12), and 13 institutions of higher education (including one community college). Among the project’s notable partners are: Northwest Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC), Methodist’s partner will provide staffing, administrative, coordination and collaborative support services for MH ComNet. The agency is responsible for planning transportation, environmental and community
development projects and coordinating broadband implementation with other infrastructure projects. MH ComNet provides important tools to help NIRPC enhance its infrastructure investments. The local governments of Gary, Merrillville and Crown Point, who will use MH ComNet, in part, to bolster public safety and emergency management, improve firefighting and EMS capabilities, expand in-vehicle mobile public safety communications, and connect community centers used for emergency shelters. Gary, Merrillville, and Crown Point Community School Corporations will be connected to MH ComNet to enhance collective educational programs. A unique ancillary project will bring fiber connectivity to 22 shuttered Gary school buildings, closed because of declining. In an innovative twist on traditional economic development initiatives, the district will sell or lease these fiber-connected buildings at extremely low cost to business entities committed to launching job-creating ventures. MH ComNet will also allow schools to expand electronic delivery of educational programs, and affordably interconnect collaborating agencies that provide services such as pre-college classes, work-force training, health screening, nursing, and public safety (especially critical for facilities used as emergency shelters). Ivy Tech Community College, Indiana University Northwest, and 16 two-year technical training colleges will interconnect with the Methodist network to leverage telecourses, specialty certifications and licensing renewals, workforce retraining, distance learning, and related educational offerings. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Northwest Indiana and the YWCA, the central mechanisms by which computer literacy is furthered in the community through children's afterschool programs providing connections to educational resources via broadband. Such access is especially important in high-poverty areas where home computers and Internet are unaffordable. The Gary/Chicago International Airport, a key driver of Gary's economic development, which serves the entire region, with cost-effective services, will lease dark fiber' meeting its growing communications needs while simultaneously supporting the network's operational budget. Airbaud, a for-profit fixed wireless Internet service provider, which will lease backhaul access on the Methodist network and provide subsidized last-mile service to healthcare facilities not passed by the fiber network. Beyond the middle-mile infrastructure delivered to community partners, MH ComNet will function as a telemedicine platform, interconnecting Methodists state-of-the-art resources with smaller, minimally equipped medical facilities in rural and inner-city areas. Clinics and small physician practices essentially serve as local healthcare centers, working in partnership with Methodist Hospitals to provide care as efficiently as possible serving residents who have less-acute needs and relieving the hospital of the burdensome cost of non-emergency and non-invasive care. Currently, many smaller clinics and health centers lack the most basic broadband network connectivity, effectively isolating them from the hospital's records, billing, and scheduling functions, as well as from medical suppliers, information databases, and worldwide providers. MH ComNet will allow for immediate, cost-effective, secure, and confidential sharing of pertinent medical information rather than taking the 'days' typically required to transfer medical films, CDs, or printed files. The network will also enable interconnection of patient-monitoring equipment sensors at remote facilities such as doctors' offices and clinics, and via a broadband wireless partner's connectivity, from ambulances or patient residences in rural and underserved urban areas. Real-time diagnostic information from remote sites could be sent in data telemetry and video format to healthcare specialists at any of Methodists facilities throughout the region for monitoring, consultation, or diagnosis. Finally, the high-capacity broadband network will support real-time, high-quality videoconferencing a valuable tool for connecting medical practitioners at multiple sites that also supports professional training (distance learning)
applications for doctors and medical staff. An in-service training course taught at a hospital or university campus could be attended by staff at remote sites across the region. And the same broadband-based video connection could be used as a public information tool to disseminate information to local residents through the Gary Access Center’s public, educational, and governmental (PEG) channels on their cable TV systems. Such programming could be delivered live in an interactive call-in format, or as playback of recorded material. In terms of education and workforce development, MH ComNet will connect 70 K-12 schools, a community college, universities, two-year technical training entities, and the WorkOne and Gary Access centers' creating a local Media, Computing and Technology Network that will electronically integrate the delivery of all technical and job-training programs in the communities. Connectivity to MH ComNet will allow service providers to collaborate to reduce costs, increase the number of people served, avoid duplication of effort and ensure the highest return on training dollars invested in the community. The proposed MH ComNet middle-mile project budget is $18.1 million. Significantly, it is expected to create 197 direct job-years.