Applicant Name: PUTNAM COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Project Title: NEFEC Community Technology Centers

Project Type: Public Computer Center

Executive Summary

The North East Florida Education Consortium (NEFEC) is applying for project funding under the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) and Broadband Initiatives Program (BIP) as part of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The intent of the NEFEC project is to provide technology access to ten unserved, underserved and/or under represented rural counties in North Florida through the development and implementation of Community Technology Centers. These centers will provide community members with broadband Internet access through the utilization of existing school and district broadband facilities, infrastructure and connections. The project also will support the addition of computer carts and wireless services to facilitate training on computer use and to provide broadband access to Internet resources such as GED preparation, basic computer literacy, health care information, job readiness information, job search engines, and on-line academic and industry certification courses.

Statement of problem In July 1999, the U.S. Department of Commerce published 'Falling through the net: a report on the telecommunications and information gap in America.' This study demonstrated that African Americans, Hispanics, senior citizens, low income persons, and residents of rural areas were significantly less likely to have access to computers and the Internet than other groups. This condition has been termed the 'digital divide.' Studies of 'digital divide' issues emphasized that rural communities were at serious risk for being left behind in the new information technology-based global economy. Lower household income correlated to lower rates of computer and Internet access, as cost of equipment and services was prohibitive for most rural residents. Lack of sufficient population density also served as a disincentive for commercial investment in the infrastructure and human resource development necessary to support the expansion of information technology (Manohar, 2001). Since rural areas are especially at risk for exclusion from the Information Age, and because rural community technology centers have demonstrated value as bridges spanning the information chasm, effective, sustainable rural community technology centers can provide much-needed technology resources often excluded from rural communities.

Your overall approach to addressing the need According to the National Broadband Plan Consumer Survey, 'Broadband adoption and use in America,' affordability and lack of digital skills are the main reasons that many Americans are not connected to high-speed Internet at home. In every district in the state of Florida, broadband is provided to school districts at a fraction of the cost due to the federal e-rate program. By utilizing the existing broadband resources found in the public schools, facilities, infrastructure and connections, the NEFEC project will create Community Technology Centers that will provide free computer and broadband Internet access for the targeted counties for an initial period of two years. The centers will operate after normal school hours and during the weekends. The project will support the addition of...
two computer carts of 20 computers each, and wireless services that connect into the existing broadband infrastructure to specified locations in each county (20 locations total) depending upon population. Additionally, four of the computers will be designated for checkout purposes to accommodate those individuals who have been pre-qualified as not having transportation to attend the centers. These individuals will also be provided with help desk/support at home. Areas to be served: population of the target area(s), including demographic information; and the estimated number of potential users of your public computer center(s). Ten counties selected to be served by this grant participate in the North Florida Broadband Authority Middle Mile project and were identified in the USDA 2008 County-Level Poverty Rates for Florida as being among the highest poverty-stricken areas in the state. These counties include Columbia, Baker, Bradford, Dixie, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Lafayette, Levy, Putnam and Union Counties. Nine of 10 of these counties report more than 17 percent of the total population living in poverty. They also report an extremely low number of the population who have any post secondary education, and this adds to the growing high unemployment numbers in this area.

NEFEC's Community Technology Centers will reach out across the many barriers that face these communities and will impact more than 98,067 households that comprise this region (http://quickfacts.census.gov ' Households 2000). Qualifications of the applicant that demonstrate the ability to implement the project and achieve its intended results This project will be managed by the North East Florida Education Consortium (NEFEC). NEFEC is a regional, non-profit educational service agency established by four school districts during the 1975-1976 school year to help support small, rural districts with limited resources to better serve children, teachers and administrators. Since 1975, the Consortium has steadily grown, now serving fifteen small and rural districts of North Florida. In addition, the organization provides assistance to over 40 districts through a wide variety of programs and services that are either contracted or offered via regional or statewide initiatives. The mission of NEFEC is to help member districts meet their educational goals and objectives by providing programs and services the individual districts would not be able to provide as effectively or as economically acting alone. Since the Consortium's inception, 'service to member districts' and a commitment to excellence have been central themes in the day-to-day operation. The 10 counties that seek to be part of this initiative are all members of the NEFEC Instructional Technology program, which provides technical support and technical in-service training to its member districts. Through this grant, NEFEC seeks to reach out to the communities of the school districts that we serve. Jobs to be saved or created A study by Breeden, et al (1998) reported that beyond the obvious goals of teaching technology dependent skills, future employment was one of the reasons why computers and technology training were important. At the time of the study, Breeden, et al (1998) reported that 60 percent of all new jobs required technology skills. That number has increased in the past ten years. By creating the Community Technology Center, the centers will be creating jobs for local citizens to be trained on the technology and the Internet to be employed by the school to serve as the mentor or facilitators in the computer centers. Those who attend the Community Technology Centers will have the opportunity to acquire marketable skills to be competitive in this digital economy. Overall cost of the proposed project The overall total proposed project cost is $3,931,462. This figure will cover the cost of 40 mobile carts to be placed at 20 school sites across North Florida for access to broadband Internet. Four additional computers will be available for checkout to the disabled population for dial-in access to an installed bank of modems. Assistive devices will also be provided so that all will be able to obtain the benefits of the Community Technology
Labs. The project will operate for a two year span. This project would continue another year with the support of NEFEC and Hayes on the dial-ups and at the Community Technology Centers. At the end of 36 months the North East Florida Broadband project should be fully implemented and the dial-ups will no longer be useful and will ultimately be replaced with broadband access to the homes through the wireless connectivity of Broadband Technology Opportunities Program.