Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

Project Title: Urbana-Champaign Big Broadband (UC2B) - Sustainable Broadband Adoption

Project Type: Sustainable Broadband Adoption

Executive Summary

A. PROBLEM STATEMENT Champaign-Urbana has an acute gap in adoption of broadband and digital literacy. On one hand, we are home to the University of Illinois, the nation's second largest research university (in research dollars) and among the top-5 ranked Computer Science programs, where we developed the first graphical Web browser Mosaic at NCSA, the light emitting diode (LED), and our alumni have developed YouTube, PayPal, the Amazon.com search and retrieval process and more. We are now building the world's fastest supercomputer, Blue Waters. But Champaign-Urbana has the widest digital divide in Illinois and perhaps the nation. Within less than a mile of the university, people do not have access to broadband, to computer workstations, or to the basic digital literacy now critical for jobs and education. We have the fifth largest population below the poverty line in Illinois, and our public schools have 60% of children federally eligible for free or reduced lunch. We know that roughly 2,000 children in our schools do not have access to a computer at home, and that broadband adoption is below 40% in our target neighborhoods. B. PROPOSED APPROACH In this SBA application, the UC2B Consortium proposes to deliver an innovative outreach and support program to drive mass broadband adoption. By focusing on the most influential nodes of influence in the core areas of economic development, health, education, and public safety--organizations that have the ability to influence thousands of residents--we will leverage the staff of local PCCs and other organizations to encourage at-home broadband subscription. We will be "embedding" and expanding broadband programs within existing social service agencies and community organizations, as well as providing a help desk, a corps of "cybernavigators" and door-to-door outreach for users adopting broadband. We have selected a demonstration group of 25 community organizations, who, when intersected with the organizations with formal training labs supported by our PCC proposal, provide good basic coverage of our local vulnerable areas and population. We have had in-depth conversation with these sites about how broadband computers, training, and outreach programs will serve their missions. We propose to expand the broadband access and programming within these 25 community organizations, before expanding services to all 145 UC2B partners. For example, the after-school youth clubs will receive workstations, staffing and training to make broadband, digital fluency, and media production a significant component of their programming for disadvantaged youth. The free health clinics will receive patient access workstations and support so that patients can use the Internet to research medical conditions, treatment options, and can securely access their medical records. In all partnering organizations, broadband will be seamlessly "embedded" into existing programs. By embedding broadband into the existing community infrastructure for vulnerable groups, job opportunities, education, health and public safety will naturally move online and the adoption of broadband will have sustained relevance in
people's lives. C. TARGET AREA The target area and the vulnerable populations were identified and chosen to specifically meet the ARRA goals and to provide job creation in an area with acute need. The geographic target area was identified in July 2009 when UC2B conducted a door-to-door household survey which found that the census block groups with less than 40% broadband up-take are exactly aligned with the lowest income and highest social isolation populations (joblessness, lower education, and lack of access to services). This target area is the "Identified Service Area" that will be served by the UC2B Infrastructure grant which was already awarded $22.5M in Round 1 to provide low-cost fiber-optic broadband service to 2,500 fiber-to-the-home customers in the target area and to provide Internet access to the community organizations where this SBA grant will provide workstations and outreach, providing a meaningful boost for job opportunities, computer fluency, and on-going use of broadband among the low-income and underserved populations of the community. The target area is the most concentrated area of poverty and joblessness in Champaign County, well above the state average. Champaign County and Cook County are the only two counties in the state with poverty rates above 15% and with over 20,000 people living in poverty (actual number in Champaign County is 29,800). By conducting broadband outreach with the target area, vulnerable populations such as Hispanics and African-Americans will have better access to broadband and the technology skills necessary for jobs in the 21st century. D. QUALIFICATIONS UC2B is a consortium of the University of Illinois and the Cities of Champaign and Urbana. UC2B has joined with partner agencies, particularly Parkland Community College and the local libraries, health clinics and school districts that serve vulnerable populations, as well as organizations working to address the digital divide. The University of Illinois is home to the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) and the Community Informatics Initiative (CII), which was preceded by Prairienet, the community network (founded in 1993) that received a TOP (the predecessor to BTOP) grant to build digital participation among low-income and minority residents. Prairienet and CII have two decades of history providing Internet and computing to underserved populations, with services that include training and support, recycling computers for public access sites, support for small nonprofits, and creating community-oriented digital content. We have worked in Champaign-Urbana, East St. Louis, Oak Park, and Chicago, Illinois; Toledo, Ohio; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Manchester, England; and S'o Tom' (Africa). We created an archive of the physical and digital records of the Technology Opportunities Program (http://hdl.handle.net/2142/5139) and initiated the collective study of the 606 projects, all using technology to solve problems in underserved areas/among vulnerable populations. We are now the largest community informatics program in the country, graduating professionals and PhD-level researchers. City and university managers steering the UC2B city-city-university consortium have personally collaborated on no less than four generations of successful campus-community computer networking: PLATO (begun 1960), the first public access point to a university's online library catalog (1984), Champaign County Network (CCNET, 1993), Prairienet (1994), and now UC2B. Our partners include federally qualified health centers, workforce development centers, K-12 and higher education, and public safety organizations. We are also partnering with key community media programs, such as the Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center. With support from foundations including the National Science Foundation and Soros Foundation, the IMC developed CUWiN (cuwireless.net), the internationally recognized leader in open source mesh network software which was used to deploy the first wifi network in Champaign-Urbana as well as the Katrina aftermath in New Orleans, the tribal lands of the Mesa Grande Reservation, and the townships of South Africa. E.
JOBS CREATED Through our total network projects we will create or save at least 27 direct jobs in construction and in staff delivering these programs, and we expect to create 80 indirect jobs through small business support.