Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS

Project Title: Bridging the e-Skills Gap in Alaska

Project Type: Sustainable Broadband Adoption

Executive Summary

Many industry experts agree that when it comes to broadband access and subsequent adoption, Alaska residents are possibly the most unserved and underserved population in the U.S. Statistics compiled by Leichtman Research Group (2007) indicated a 9.2% digital broadband service penetration in Alaska – the lowest of all 50 states. Alaska's rural areas are for the most part limited to satellite connectivity. There are only a few areas in rural Alaska with any terrestrial microwave distribution systems; they deploy broadband services across limited areas. The Regulatory Commission of Alaska Broadband Inventory (Jan. 2007) showed 47/341 small, rural communities with no broadband or even local dialup service. The vast majority of the 294 communities with Internet availability receive a signal at or below 256kbps. Paradoxically, given the conditions just described, many public-serving agencies and institutions in Alaska have content already prepared for broadband delivery, but not the internal capacity to promote its use. Users become frustrated when content that is media-rich is incompletely downloaded or interrupted during transmission in the current environment. Project partners have also discovered that consumers and end-users may be unaware of the content and/or have limited information literacy skills to use it. Not all content is intuitive or friendly to end users, particularly new users. In addition, many agencies have spent valuable resources creating content that is duplicative of existing materials. There are few opportunities in rural Alaska for non-traditional audiences (i.e. those not in school or with a job requiring technology use) to 'try out' personal computing equipment or become acquainted with broadband resources. Further, most communities do not have individuals trained to meet local information technology needs; if a new user becomes frustrated with the experience there is no one to turn to locally for help. This project to Bridge the e-Skills Gap in Alaska is an innovative proposal by a powerful multi-sector group of partners from the education, health care, early childhood, social services, government, and public safety sectors to create a strategic coordinated framework to promote technology literacy and training to vulnerable and hard to reach populations in rural Alaska. The activities proposed here represent a systemic and coordinated approach to broadband adoption for Alaska. The project activities will lead to sustainable adoption of publicly available broadband content by a wide spectrum of end-users across Alaska and increased use of technology best practices by the project partners. Project partners include the Alaska Coast Guard Tribal Liaison Office, Alaska Injury Prevention Center, Alaska Library Network and Digital Pipeline, Alaska Military Entrance Office, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, Alaska State Hospital and Nursing Home Association, Alaska Rural Telehealth Network, Alaska Teacher Placement and Alaska Statewide Mentor Program, Alaska Vocational Technical Center, Alaska Department of Labor, Alaska Workforce Investment Board, Best Beginnings, Barrow Arctic Science Consortium, Center for Alaska Native Health Research, Alaska...
Department of Education and Early Development, Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Family Centered Services of Alaska, Ilisagvik Tribal College, KACN-TV, Rural Alaska Community Action Program, Inc., and University of Alaska Office of Information Technology (lead partner and grant applicant). The Bridging the e-Skills Gap in Alaska project has 4 primary goals, consistent with the BTOP statutory purpose: 'To create digital literacy among Alaskans by leveraging the 29 anchor institution PCCs and broadband content of statewide interest and applicability. 'To stimulate job creation by training a cadre of 80 local rural residents with information technology software and hardware skills of immediate use to new broadband technology users in the community, and with employability value to training participants. 'To encourage technology use among underserved audiences across Alaska with a broadband awareness program using print, radio and electronic media that includes a wide spectrum of topics to encourage broadband use, and through an innovative computer device loan program. 'To create a statewide Multi-Sector Digital Inclusion Council, operating under the Alaska Distance Education Consortium (AkDEC) housed at the University of Alaska, as a forum for the discussion and sharing of best practices and the elimination of redundancy through sharing of partner-developed content. This project is ambitious because of its scope; it extends the capabilities and usefulness of 29 rural PCCs to be created at anchor institutions that together serve over 150,000 Alaska residents. The 21 SBA partner institutions, agencies, and businesses expect this project to reach across Alaska, generating up to 88,000 new broadband users in the next three years and providing an average of 4 hours of training to over 84,000 Alaskans, including school-age children, professional adults, unemployed adults, and senior citizens. Potential new users were counted carefully to avoid duplicate counts, i.e. new professional users specifically include health aides and nurses, teachers, and school administrators. New adult users in the total count include the unemployed and senior citizens. This project will result in the creation of 76 new jobs, calculated using the Council of Economic Advisors formula. This project proposes some creative strategies for reaching Alaska’s diverse and disbursed residents. Video conferencing technology, live electronic discussions, and web archiving of content for asynchronous retrieval will all be used. Much of the training is local job capacity building ' Village IT support, TeleHealth coordinators, continuing education for educators and other professionals, and work skill readiness as a tool for addressing unemployment and poverty. 32% of the project budget represents training costs with an average per person cost for broadband awareness or broadband-assisted training of just $51. This is a phenomenal demonstration of the value of broadband for precipitating change in Alaska: Currently, most training occurs in a hub community and regularly tops $1,000 per person for travel alone. The project partners themselves intend to use broadband technology for project management. The budget includes resources for a practical approach to introducing end-users to broadband technology for personal use by purchasing relatively inexpensive mobile devices that can be loaned to users. The total cost of the mobile broadband equipment is $601,889. - a per unit cost of $946. The costs to achieve the objectives of this proposal are very reasonable given its statewide scope. The total project budget is $6,967,284. The 21 project partners are providing a 34.7% match, $2,422,738. The cash match is $180,000 with the rest of the match as in-kind contributions directly attributable to this project. Notably, 34% of the match was contributed by the media partner for radio and TV time as well as print advertisement purchase for the awareness campaign. The Alaska Distance Education Consortium (AkDEC) is the ideal sponsor for this statewide initiative. Housed at the University of Alaska, under the
statewide Office of Information Technology, the consortium has a successful 10 year history of coordinating statewide technology initiatives and services.