The viNGN Public Computer Centers Program (viNGN PCC) is integral to the mass adoption of broadband in the U.S. Virgin Islands. This program will work in conjunction with the viNGN Sustainable Broadband Adoption Program to enable rapid expansion of Internet access within the Territory. PCC will supply the logistics, workstations, and workgroup 'pod' configurations throughout the Territory that support companion viNGN programs. viNGN PCC supplies the equipment and basic know-how for the USVI public Internet access plan that supports 90% of human needs driving standard market adoption cycles for broadband. The Department of Planning and Natural Resources/Division of Libraries, Archives and Museums (DLAM) heads these bold outreach programs to provide enhanced Internet access and direct digital content availability. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM The Virgin Islands easily meets each measurement for qualification as an 'underserved area.' It is both socio-economically challenged and technology deprived. People at all economic strata and their institutions in the Virgin Islands trail by significant margins meaningful access to most forms of globally disseminated information. This differential in Internet availability and affordability between the Virgin Islands and its global competition poses socio-economic threats. Residential broadband adoption rate in the USVI stands at 41% (USVI Bureau of Economic Research) in the region as opposed to 84% (according to Us Department of Commerce and Telecommunications Industry Association) throughout the United States in general. Several varied socio-economic factors combine in causing this lack of adoption. In 2008 the per capita income in the Territory was $20,381 which was barely one half of the U.S. average of $39,751 (51%) according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis and USVI Bureau of Economic Research. It was substantially less than the poorest state, $29,569 for Mississippi (31% less). The USVI Bureau of Economic Research currently shows 23.7% of the population living below the poverty line. This puts the general economic condition in the Virgin Islands below all states. In addition, the number of USVI citizens lacking adequate education (below 9th grade and lacking a high school diploma) is twice the US average, and the number of foreign-born residents is three times; both representing increased barriers to adoption. Yet VI broadband prices tend to be 156% higher than mainland prices. As a result the penetration of broadband use in the USVI is far below the average in the rest of the nation. THE EFFECTIVE SOLUTION The PCC Program will provide Internet-enabled PCs free for public use at all libraries, at community centers, and for checkout use in the large telework program launched by the viNGN Sustainable Broadband Program. The viNGN PCC approach is not a simplistic, just PC installation program. The program maximizes overall adoption by including training and a Territory-wide technical support ecosystem to support use of the new PCs and equipment. The visioning process is run by the viNGN Technology Team made up of management and volunteers in multiple areas. The process is
intended to launch the program, and to continuously optimize the overall technical ecosystem supporting it. The program focuses on providing technology assisted access for individuals and small groups working together to train, search and apply for meaningful well-paid work, both in the Territory and the U.S. This PCC plan will provide equipment for use by the general community including children, young adults, the undereducated, and the elderly. It will provide access to computers for those who have no access. It will provide equipment that will provide training in computer literacy skills, and an effective connection to the 21st century global marketplace. Our synchronized three grant proposals fully address all five BTOP statutory purposes. OVERALL APPROACH The viNGN public-private partnership will provide the requisite environments to securely house, oversee, administer and monitor public computers that operate in public places in different interrelated configurations. The design patterns are the following: A. Two conference centers: each with 21 seats projection screen used for distance training classes and telework group meetings B. Small and medium centers: each with 7-18 PC carrels with management station C. Micro center multi-purpose pod conference rooms for small workgroups, videoconference interviews, and small inter-island distance training sessions D. Kiosks in public places for information and convenient access. The PCs will provide general Internet access, and will also provide to the public our learner-directed education program. This program is produced and directed by the National Education Foundation and is an important part of the viNGN Sustainable Broadband Adoption program. These PCs will also provide remote access to the advanced technical courses available at the UVI Carrier Ethernet Academy. The telework program will use portable PCs that can be checked out, supported by our BetterWorld virtual call center approach, and maintained via our supply chain partner Radio Shack. Each of these centers will be strategically located in neighborhoods and communities throughout the Territory to achieve maximum access to the population and effective penetration of library information services. The PCCs, as envisioned here, will assist immeasurably in removing barriers to empowerment and self-actuation in areas of education, employment, economic development and health care information, especially where most of the Territory's rural areas are either unserved or underserved by realistic mass public transit options. Partnerships forming the host sites will be required to provide secured space, appropriate light and power, and adequate personnel necessary to ensure effective, secure, no-cost use of the facility by the community. In addition to any certifications of fitness and responsibility imposed by the host agency on the personnel committed to this program, each person's (employee or volunteer) competence to provide the required program services will be certified by viNGN. The content offerings will be similar enough to the library system's current in-house public access computer services that the transition to the new setup and offerings should be easily achievable. Differences will primarily be in the scale of the offerings and numbers served. These adjunct services may be administered with the referral assistance of on-site personnel and by employing online queries or ‘over the shoulder’ assistance and guidance from qualified reference staff at one of our participating library agencies. TARGETED USER BASE Many of these facilities are located in poor neighborhoods, where educational opportunities and the ability to work from home, close to young children, will help raise educational and income levels to reduce poverty. For example, the USVI ' Has 37,093 (34% of the population vs. 24% in the US overall) people under 18 years old. ' Has 25,876 (39% of the population vs. 20% overall) people lacking a high school diploma. ' Has 36,087 (33% of the population vs. 13% overall) foreign-born people. We estimate the number of PCC users during the business week to increase from 4316 per week to 7992, and the weekend users to increase from 80 to
222, a total increase of 3818 new users throughout the Territory per week. QUALIFICATIONS The broadband technologies proposed by viNGN Public Computer Centers in the Virgin Islands replicate and expand DLAM’s history of demonstrated capability in delivering content and information services throughout the Territory. Our national supply chain partner supports the need for scale as the number of PCs and other equipment expands. Using the Council of Economic Advisors guidelines, and adjusting for far lower income levels within the USVI, the coordinated viNGN programs (CCI, PCC, SBA) are expected to create 876 total job years (346 within the USVI and 530 in the US overall). (52 total for the PCC Program itself) In addition, we expect the BetterWorld telework/virtual call center program will create another 420 long term jobs within the USVI. The USVI has reviewed and endorses these findings and the methodology used. The overall cost of the PCC project is $4,612,054 with the grant request being $3,228,438. The matching funds are in-kind contributions from the National Education Foundation inventory of courses that will support both the basic training needs for this PCC program plus additional courses that support the viNGN SBA program.