Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: VIRGIN ISLANDS PUBLIC FINANCE AUTHORITY

Project Title: viNGN Sustainable Broadband Adoption Program

Project Type: Sustainable Broadband Adoption

Executive Summary

THE NEED FOR IMPROVING BROADBAND ADOPTION RATES
The proposed viNGN Sustainable Broadband Adoption Program specifically addresses a major problem that presses upon the U.S. Virgin Islands just as it does upon other U.S. rural communities, namely the need to attract industry and young people. As the population ages younger people move to more urbanized parts of the country for economic opportunities. The preponderance of unemployment and low-paying service jobs results in 23.7% of the population living below the poverty line, according to the latest numbers from the USVI Bureau of Economic Research. To attract today's businesses and retain jobs, we need reliable high-speed Internet. Robust high-speed connections will allow more of our residents to telecommute and stay in the community, would afford them better opportunities to learn, and would allow their businesses to operate more efficiently. All our citizens can benefit from inexpensive training that will enable workers to enter career fields for which there is growing demand, particularly in the areas of health care and IT, which are at the center of the training offerings we are proposing to provide.

OVERALL APPROACH
To maximize use of this investment, we need to maximize the ability of our residents to benefit from it. By helping to bridge the educational and skills gaps, we will make the entire investment more sustainable. Our innovative approaches are evident in four main ways. First, we will use our viNGN broadband connectivity and our public technology centers to provide customized skills training for jobs that are in demand in the local area and for telework that will be a key growth industry in this area. We will not overlook, however, the needs of a significant proportion of the population we are serving, who may not have graduated from high school or who graduated without needed skills. We will encourage everyone in the Virgin Islands to become digitally literate and to prove their competencies by taking an industry-recognized certification known as the Internet Core Competency Certificate (IC3). Secondly, we will set up teams of stakeholders, businesses, educators, health care and emergency service workers, and others to inform people about the use and value of the courses. These teams will set up groups of volunteers who will support workers in key job skill areas and use our telementoring platform if necessary. The third innovative element is an electronic database (a job bank) that will be available to local and distant employers. It will document key information about our students, if they wish to be included, such as the courses they took, hours spent, tests passed and certifications achieved (validated from our state of the art Learning Management System). This will provide all parties a clear incentive to fully participate in the system and to find simple mechanisms to recognize and reward effort and results. We plan to celebrate achievements through public ceremonies where awards will be issued and media invited. The fourth dimension of our attack will establish virtual call centers within the Territory using an established telework approach. BetterWorld Telecom will establish virtual call systems with a variety of
large companies throughout the United States that will recruit teleworkers in the Virgin Islands using high fidelity videoconferencing interview techniques. The new library workgroup 'pod' centers will then form a community hub and meeting place for teleworkers to gather regularly for the all-important 'touch' staff meetings with their companies so that isolation will not be a major factor. In addition to the payload training sessions, we will provide an orchestrated set of social events that will make the library centers a magnet for all ages. These social elements will be key to making the Internet relevent to those who do not yet use it. The abundant availability of cost-free access will make Internet use more closely approach that of the rest of the United States. TARGET POPULATION Our primary target population consists of workers between the ages of 16 and 64 who are either unemployed or underemployed about 3,500 of the workforce. Many have been unable to find employment because of disability, lack of high school diplomas, lack of training, or because they are discouraged by the high unemployment rates. We target children to provide assistance in getting started with the use of the Internet at an early age as part of our children's program. We also target the older generation who do not feel comfortable with computers and require much support to learn to use the technology. APPLICANT QUALIFICATIONS The Department of Libraries, Archives, and Museums already provides some public computer services within the libraries for access to the Internet, and the expansion of library capabilities to be a digital hub for the community has been studied for some time. The National Education Foundation is a popular source of online learning modules, programs, and certification methods that run nationally and have been used by BTOP Round One awardees elsewhere. They operate their courses and training programs nationally. BetterWorld is focused on providing telework programs using VoIP services with a mission to reduce the number of workers that contribute to the environmental problem by driving to work. They currently operate their system in 22 states. JOBS TO BE SAVED OR CREATED The viNGN SBA project will create a total of 42 job years. The citizens of the Virgin Islands will also be in line for a forecast 420 new energy saving telework jobs that are expected to be garnered through the BetterWorld program. NEF courses are designed to prepare citizens to be more competitive when applying for existing and new job markets. For example, Project Management, IC3, and Microsoft Office certification courses make workers in a range of industries (any field that uses basic computer skills or runs projects) more qualified. In turn, these workers then make the companies they work for more efficient and able to save and create jobs. OVERALL COST Federal funds needed: $2,685,081. The National Education Foundation will donate $1,150,749 worth of online course licenses. This adds up to a combined total project cost of $3,835,831.