Applicant Name: PINE BLUFF, CITY OF

Project Title: City of Pine Bluff BTOP Initiative for Public Computer Centers

Project Type: Public Computer Center

Executive Summary

Problem Statement: While adoption rates for broadband service increased nationally from 2008 to 2009 across all population groups, there are certain population groups who still exhibit below average adoption rates. This is particularly true for African-American and low-income households. According to research conducted by Pew Research Center (PRC), nationally, broadband adoption among the African-American subgroup increased from 43% in 2008 to 46% in 2009. This change "represents the second consecutive year that African Americans have had below-average growth in home broadband adoption," according to Pew's research. While nationally, low-income Americans realized significant broadband adoption growth, low-income Arkansans still lag far behind. According to PRC, those who reported household incomes of $20K per year saw broadband adoption growth from 29% in 2008 to 35% in 2009. Furthermore, those who reported household incomes between $20K and $30K annually saw broadband adoption grow from 42% to 53%. Similar research conducted by Connect Arkansas reveals a mere 19% broadband service adoption rate among households with incomes less than $30K annually. Research conducted by both the PRC and Connect Arkansas provide insight into barriers for low adoption rates among nonusers of broadband service. According to the PRC, the reasons cited by nonusers related to the Internet's relevance, availability, usability, and price. The major factor cited among these is relevance, which was applicable to 50% of nonusers in the PRC survey. This is consistent with Connect Arkansas's response of "I don't need broadband service," which was cited by 45% of the respondents in the low-income population subgroup. While usability was cited as a barrier for only 13% of respondents in the PRC survey, this project will also seek to mitigate the issue of "insufficient digital and technical literacy." The digital and technical literacy component is capable of yielding a two-fold result - removal of this issue as barriers to both broadband service adoption and better-paying job opportunities, resulting further in the elimination of "price" as a barrier. The "availability" barrier is not applicable to the urbanized area of Pine Bluff, for it is considered "served," with respect to broadband service. Consequently, this project seeks to address "relevance" and "usability" barriers to broadband service adoption rates among selected vulnerable populations within the City of Pine Bluff by: (1) increasing awareness of the personal relevance and utility of broadband technology and online content and (2) implementing a digital and technical literacy program in structured settings. Program Solution: There are three key program elements to this grant: neighborhood-based access to broadband technology, broadband relevance and usability education, and specialized computer-related training. While the first two program elements are projected to have a direct impact on broadband service adoption rates, the third element is projected to support broadband adoption as well. For instance, participants who gain marketable skills via the specialized computer training will have access to a greater range of economic
opportunities. Subsequently, this may eliminate the "price" barrier to broadband adoption, once participants are able to access higher-paying jobs. Nevertheless, this element will greatly increase the pool of technologically-skilled job candidates, contributing to economic growth of the area. The first program element, neighborhood-based access, establishes six fixed and two mobile public computer centers serving high-poverty areas within Pine Bluff/Jefferson County. Together, these centers will provide 218 new workstations, 22 improved workstations, multiple training opportunities for more than 3,000 individuals, and expectantly generate 8,900 new broadband users. These centers will supplement broadband access currently available by offering neighborhood-based, extended weekday and weekend hours that are not currently available. The mobile centers will further provide broadband access to areas that are isolated from anchor institutions and partnering agencies. Collectively, these centers will ensure that broadband access as well as relevance and usability education will be made available to each sector of the city, with an emphasis on statistically-high-poverty U.S. Census block groups. In addition to public computer centers, access to specialized broadband technology will be provided by two of the key partners. These technologies include video conferencing capabilities for small businesses and online/distance learning capabilities for teachers, students, and other participants. Specifically, this project seeks to address "relevance" and "usability" barriers to broadband service adoption among African-American and low-income population subgroups within the City of Pine Bluff. This will be done by (1) increasing awareness of the personal relevance and utility of broadband technology and online content for a minimum of 6,000 households/persons and (2) implementing a digital and technical literacy program to certify a minimum of 1,500 persons over the project period. These efforts will also result in improved job-skills for more than 1,500 participants who complete the digital and technical literacy program. The third element, specialized computer training, will be offered by four of the partner centers, including computer-based management programs for small businesses. Specialized computer training may be expanded as the partners implement their programs. The City of Pine Bluff has implemented numerous federally funded projects over the years, including managing over $1.5M annually through its CDBG and HOME programs and $1M annually through its transit program. It also serves as the fiscal agent for the city's Weed and Seed program and oversees HUD affordable housing programs in the city implemented by local housing corporations.