Executive Summary

Education and social service providers are concerned that over 50% of the students in the San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District (SMCISD) qualify for free/reduced price lunches and 45% percent of the adults are performing at low literacy rates. San Marcos employers are in need of skilled workers but public transportation and job training opportunities in San Marcos are minimal. The San Marcos CommunityNet (SMCN) eases this problem by making local information available online and making access to this information possible for persons in outlying, high-poverty communities. San Marcos has no commercial or public radio or television stations. This makes public discourse on emerging issues, a foundation of democracy, difficult at best. Voter turnout is typically very low, as there is no forum other than a local newspaper that publishes only 5 days a week to share opinions. The Internet has changed all that in recent years. Two online newspapers, email, blogs, and social networking sites provide forums for discussion of issues, make public meeting agendas easily available, and provide an easy way to communicate with elected officials. A relative wealth of social services makes coordination of services and avoiding duplication of services problematic. Services and programs change regularly. This situation is difficult for the providers, who want to coordinate services, and for the users of the services. The SMCN allows providers at one location to help those in need learn about and apply for services more easily. Children need support outside of school. Many SMCISD students live in homes without computer access. Over half of SMCISD students come from economically disadvantaged homes. Lack of transportation makes it impossible for many to reach existing public access sites. Parents who use the public access sites to improve their English literacy, educational status, or employability are better able to support their children's learning in the home. In 2001, to address these needs 15 organizations, including the San Marcos Housing Authority (SMHA), obtained funding from the Texas Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund and the U.S. Department of Education to place public access terminals in schools, public housing sites, and other public facilities. This program was known as the San Marcos Community Network (SMCN) and was coordinated by the school district. In 2004, when the funding expired, host agencies maintained the computer centers with varying degrees of success. The SMHA Resident Services department not only maintained its centers at 3 housing sites but improved and expanded them. Using reserve funds, we instituted a server system at each site to extend the life of aging PC’s by turning them into client terminals. This allowed us to more easily cope with configuration issues at each site. Members of SMCN believed that the economic and educational inequities existing in our community could be corrected, and that a community network could play an important role in achieving greater equity. We developed goals that focused primarily on improving the lives of our disadvantaged citizens and improving community-wide communication: ” Improve access to
advanced technology in rural and/or economically disadvantaged neighborhoods and outlying high-poverty communities. ' Stimulate economic development through cultivation of a technologically skilled workforce. ' Provide avenues for interactive community communications. ' Improve ease of access to health and social services. We selected entities as our public access locations based primarily on their ability to help us reach the low-income population, and to make access available for the greatest number of hours. These public organizations served as 'anchors' in our community. We installed our workstations in July 2001. Classes began in August 2001 and the labs were connected to the Internet and brought online in February 2002. There were 16 centers and 117 workstations. Originally, the SMCN included 27 terminals placed at three public housing sites: the Allen Woods Homes (125 housing units), the C.M. Allen Homes (100 housing units), and the Chapultepec Homes (30 housing units). The entire Chapultepec site is dedicated to the Family Self-Sufficiency Program. In 2002, initial results were very encouraging. In 2003, the SMHA completed a major renovation of the resident center at the C.M. Allen homes. This included setting aside a significant portion of the building for their computer lab, thereby expanding and enhancing resident services at a site that is isolated from much of the community because of it's location east of Interstate 35, which makes access to most city parks, city hall, and the university problematic for those without personal transportation. In 2006, the resident center at the Allen Woods Homes was doubled in size. The renovation included the specific needs of the computer lab. In 2009, office space was reconfigured at Springtown Villa, a multifamily site with 60 apartments serving elderly and disabled residents. The Resident Services department, in cooperation with site management, AARP volunteers, and the Resident Council, created an 'Internet Caf'' with four computer stations. This center has been successful in teaching elderly and disabled residents how to use PC's and how to access information on the Internet. However, much of our workstation and network equipment, as well as the center furniture, are nearing the end of their useful life. In addition, transmission speeds must be upgraded to accommodate current Internet usage patterns. The SMHA supports the social service and educational functions of its Resident Services department but because of the need for renovations to housing units and repairs to infrastructure, it has no extra funds to devote to the computer centers. The SMHA has been on the cutting edge of services to residents in public housing for over two decades. The integration of the SMCN into our public housing sites is a prime example of how we leverage community resources to benefit our residents. The SMHA was involved in the planning and implementation of the SMCN. It no longer exists as a formal project but our portion of it is bigger and better than ever. We have used our extensive connections within the community to seek out partnerships with organizations that serve residents in other low-income neighborhoods. In one case (Youth Services Bureau) we will improve services and extend the life of their computer center significantly. In another case, we will reestablish a center in a neighborhood that lost service when the sponsoring organization (The Mitchell Center) lost a major partner. The Greater Bethel Baptist Church has agreed to take on this role in a historically Black neighborhood that is not served by any other nearby public computer center. The SMHA is currently designing a classroom building to facilitate adult education for FSS and Head Start families to be placed at the Chapultepec Homes. We will use this facility on a regular basis to teach computer and Internet skills to our target population. Unlike the Public Computer Centers, which incorporate individual workstations, this learning center will allow for group instruction, using wirelessly connected laptop PC's and two large screens for instructor displays. The facility is being built with funding from the City of San Marcos and the SMHA but those funds do not
include furnishing and equipping the center. We will serve the following areas in San Marcos: Allen Woods Homes & Springtown Villa - Census Tract 103.01 (pop. 10,176) C. M. Allen Homes ' Census Tract 103.02 (pop. 4,326) Chapultepec Homes & Youth Services Bureau ' Census Tract 105 (pop. 2,783) Greater Bethel Baptist Church ' Census Tract 101 (pop. 1,908) In general, San Marcos is 72% white, 5% black, and 38% Hispanic (white and non-white). Allen Woods, Springtown Villa, and the C. M. Allen homes areas generally reflect this mix. The Chapultepec Homes and the Youth Services Bureau are in what is known as the barrio, which is overwhelmingly Mexican-American. The Greater Bethel Baptist Church is in the historic 'Dunbar' neighborhood and is predominantly African-American. Overall, San Marcos has a high percentage of low-income families. The neighborhoods we propose to serve have median household incomes ranging from $23,000 to $32,000. The percentage of individuals living below the poverty level ranges from 20% to 40%. We expect the average weekly usage at each center to be as follows: Allen Woods Homes ' 125 Springtown Villa ' 90 C. M. Allen Homes ' 125 Chapultepec Homes Computer Center - 125 Chapultepec Homes Teaching Center ' 60 Youth Services Bureau ' 75 Greater Bethel Baptist Church ' 84 We estimate this project will save or create 4 jobs. The overall cost of the project will be $260,920 with in-kind support valued at $119,400.