The Pathways Public Computer Center Project will target seven underserved Heartland Florida markets as well as an economic development zone located in an economically distressed area of Tampa. The rural portions of our targeted service area is a region that has been severely impacted by the current economic recession. According to a "May 2008 Economic Benchmark Study", by LAT Consulting, The South Central Florida Rural Area of Critical Economic Concern is comprised of six counties, three cities, and one community. The counties are Desoto, Glades, Hardee, Hendry, Highlands, and Okeechobee. The cities are located in Palm Beach County and are Belle Glade, Pahokee and South Bay. The community of Immokalee is located in Collier County. In 1999, the region was designated by Governor Bush as a Rural Area of Critical Economic Concern (RACEC) because of its long-term economic distress, low per capita income, disproportionate labor force distribution, a persistent poverty level, low wages and poor educational attainment. For much of the past century, agriculture has been the chief industry throughout much of the targeted region but employment in this sector has declined considerably with the closing of several large agricultural concerns. The Palm Beach County Economic Development Office says joblessness in the Glades (which includes much of our targeted service area) reached 'depression levels' in 2009, with 32 percent of people unemployed, compared with a countywide (Palm Beach County) rate of about 11 percent. Including people who have given up seeking jobs, 40 percent of people in the Glades are out of work, the agency said. The agency reported that 'the Glades is a community with no visible means of support, a situation that is creating angry and disenfranchised adults with few options to a stable and productive life.' The 2009 study painted a bleak picture of the Glades. Poverty is the norm, it found, with nearly 40 percent of residents receiving food stamps and 85 percent of students getting free or reduced-price school lunches. Overall, poverty in the targeted service area is considerably higher than the national average, with more than 19% of the population living at or below the poverty level. Similarly, wages in the region are considerably lower than the state and national averages with the average annual income at about $30,570, compared to the national average of more than $40,000. ePath’s PCCP mission is to provide free access to public computer centers with broadband access for the purpose of providing distance postsecondary education, awareness, and training. ePath Communications of Florida, LLC, a public-private partnership with the University of South Florida (USF) and New Horizons Computer Learning Center of Gulf Coast Florida (New Horizons) formed to implement the PCCP, will set up the PCC to be comprised of eight (8) public computer center locations. The PCCP includes seven (7) public computer centers that will be located in the following rural, underserved communities: Arcadia, Sebring, Wauchula, Immokalee, Belle Glade, Clewiston, and Okeechobee. The eighth center will be located in Tampa, Florida in a facility that will also house
equipment for delivering educational and training content via broadband for the targeted populations served by all eight public computer center locations. ePath will construct a building in an economic development zone for use for these purposes. Overall approach to addressing the need: ePath Communications of Florida, LLC has established a public-private partnership with the University of South Florida and New Horizons Computer Learning Center of Gulf Coast Florida (New Horizons) with the common goal of establishing the Pathways Computer Center Project which will be comprised of eight (8) public computer center locations to be located in the heart of rural, underserved communities. Our public computer center project will provide access to broadband service to persons living in unserved and underserved rural communities in the South Central Florida and Tampa region. Specifically, our project will provide free access to public computer centers with broadband access for the purpose of providing postsecondary education, awareness, and training. Our public computer centers will use broadband technologies and Cisco Systems' state-of-the-art interactive two-way communications technologies to provide training for residents, unemployed and displaced workers, and other individuals to bridge the "digital divide" in our targeted communities. Our overall focus is to provide free broadband access in our public computer centers and to retrain unemployed and displaced workers in economically depressed markets to provide a skilled workforce. College credit courses and certified career training will also be available to retrain displaced and unemployed workers and to provide more options for residents and businesses to improve their lifestyle, education, healthcare, productivity, and employment opportunities. The public-private partnership working with ePath to deploy and make programs available through the centers has extensive experience in providing training, education, and employment referral services to the residents of areas to be served by the Pathways sites. Our educational programs are designed to meet the needs of the diverse population we serve, both demographically and economically. The project, which also includes the Florida Workforce Investment Agency (WIA), the Florida State Department of Education, and municipal and county libraries, is designed to foster the creation of a digital community in the areas served by the 8 centers. The public computer centers will be sustained through a combination of public and private educational grants, which ePath expects will include WIA for employment-related training and commercial businesses for job-specific training. Area(s) to be served; population of the target area(s), including demographic information. The targeted service area encompasses seven counties and has a population of 273,335, which represents potential users that reside in 95,832 households. The service area has 10,866 business units. The Tampa broadcast center and public computer center is located in a New Market Tax Credit Economic Development Zone, which is a low income, economically depressed part of the city. The other markets, region-wide, about 76% of the population is White, with approximately 22% Hispanic, 10% Black and the remainder a mixture of races. Throughout the targeted region, only about half of the individuals age 25 and older have an education beyond a high school diploma. This educational attainment level trails the state by 30%. Qualifications of the applicant: ePath's management is highly qualified to successfully carry out a project of this size and scale and has years of experience in developing and deploying large-scale broadband networks costing up to $100 million. Furthermore, the new organization has developed partnerships to bring our project to fruition expeditiously. USF is a world-renowned educational and research institution and is one of only three Florida public universities classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a top tier research university, and the only Florida university of 39 public colleges and universities classified as Community Engaged. New Horizons is one of the world's
leading providers of information technology training and offers Workforce Investment Act (WIA) training programs that are specifically designed to meet stringent regulatory rules in all 50 states. As per its agreement with the State of Florida, New Horizons is required to adhere to the highest of performance metrics and maintain a job placement rate for program graduates of no less than 80%--a standard which it has proudly met and exceeded for more than ten years. IVCI is a world leader in the design, installation, and support of easy to use and reliable video remote distance learning projects. Jobs to be saved or created: Our project will create approximately 30 direct jobs resulting from staff additions to ePath assigned to the PCCP project. In addition, providing skilled training and higher educational opportunities will improve the communities' labor force qualifications, which will have an indirect effect on creating additional jobs as local employees access their employment needs, as well as attracting new companies to locate in the region based on the educated pool of potential employees. We expect our student enrollments to average 36 per month. Therefore, over 400 unemployed workers per year could be retrained in the region. Overall cost of the proposed project: The total project cost is: $9,404,417 Epath communications is requesting $6,159,345 in BTOP funds and will provide $3,245,072 in matching funds, which represents 34.5% of the total project costs.