Executive Summary

Over its four decades of work, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund has concentrated its development efforts in 'persistently poor counties,' those which rank lowest in demographic measure of income, poverty, employment, housing and other measures of quality of life. The mission of the Federation is dedicated to lift the economic conditions and preserve the landholdings of family farmers and other rural residents in these low wealth communities, and ensure that resources are targeted to the poorest people. The Federation's work in Alabama is coordinated through the Rural Training and Research Center (RTRC), where the proposed Computer Center will be housed. The facilities of the RTRC include offices; a computer center; a cafeteria; auditorium; classroom building; dormitory, demonstration farms and forestry plots, a nature trail, and acres of open spaces. The RTRC is used both by the Federation for cooperative and agricultural training, and by the community for meetings, family reunions, etc. The Federation's RTRC is located in the Alabama Black Belt area, which is home to high levels of poverty, low educational attainment, and unemployment rates that significantly exceed the state averages. According to a preliminary questionnaire of available Internet Service Providers (ISP) in the western Alabama Counties, most residents with computers in their homes have dial-up services. They are unable to receive high speed internet service, because the service providers do not provide this service in these rural areas. Furthermore, there are numerous residents in western Alabama that cannot afford to have a computer, let alone, internet access. The Federation is proposing to use its Computer Center to address some of these needs by providing community members with technology access/ training programs that focusing on income generating and workforce development activities. The Computer Center will train rural western Alabama residents on basic literacy, computer and job training skills. The goal of the project is two-fold: (1) Provide improved broadband access to residents of the five western Sumter County cities/towns; and three neighboring residents of Greene County, and (2) increase the employability and educational/skill level of residents of Greene and Sumter counties' particularly with a focus on the growing industry in West Alabama. The Federation's work with limited resource families in rural areas across the southeast, coincidentally represents the group that is underserved or unserved by broadband. Our audience for the Computer Training and Resource Center are limited resource families of Sumter and Northeast Greene Counties areas. While there are pockets of broadband and/or alternative service along the fringes, the cost of broadband access is out of their reach or does not exist at all in their areas. There are approximately 3257 residents located in the target area. We anticipate that at a minimum, approximately a-tenth of the residents will use the Center. The general audience for the training and education programs through the BTOP Public Computer Center Grant will be high school drop outs, high school students, small business owners, unemployed people
looking for jobs, forest/land owners, etc located in north Sumter County, and northeast Greene County. (Please see Appendix 1 for a detailed description of the demographic breakdown of the target area). The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/LAF will work with GTABS Engineering, Inc., a Georgia-based minority-owned small business, specializing in engineering consulting, outsourcing and implementation, in basic computer operation/awareness, internet operation, web designing, etc to help inspire new understanding of computer use, internet and broadband access. In addition, the Federation has for over 40 years worked in the rural, low-income areas, and brings a wealth of experience in community, organizing and development. The Federation's staff will provide the oversight and work to develop a curriculum that meets the needs of our audience; and provide day to day supervision of the center staff and program development and fund raising for programs in support of the center. The overall cost of the proposed project is $1,881,790.