Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: MOBILE FAIR HOUSING CENTER

Project Title: Southwest Alabama Regional Area Network

Project Type: Sustainable Broadband Adoption

_______________________ Executive Summary __________________

Southwest Alabama for the purpose of this application is comprised of eight counties located in the southern portion of the State, the counties that make up this region are: Baldwin, Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Escambia, Mobile, Monroe and Washington. The region is bordered to west by Mississippi, east by the Florida panhandle and south by the Gulf of Mexico. Technologically speaking, there exists both a logical and physical separation between the citizens in the remote rural areas and the urban population centers of Southwest Alabama. Logically, there's no reason for either group to experience the high rates of computer illiteracy or Internet incompetency given the abundance of high tech resources present in the certain parts of the area. Physically, the lack of public centers with free or low cost Internet Access or the lack of Internet Service access facilities beyond northern Baldwin and Mobile counties, makes this a reality which hampers the region's ability to tout itself as one the area in the state that is 'wired'. The Internet service beyond these points is slow (dial-up), expensive (satellite/private line), and sparsely deployed (towns/within city limits). The impact to the region is that unlike many other places in the nation, is Southwest Alabama's inability to embrace or engage in education, workforce and economic development, healthcare initiatives is greatly diminished as opposed to areas of the US where Broadband access is in abundance and affordable. Given a poverty rate of 19.85 (Source: www.city-data.com 2008) the benefit of having broadband throughout the region could help lower the region's poverty rate. The Center for Fair Housing (CFH), a non-profit agency formed to promote fair housing thru public education, seeks funding for their Southwest Alabama Regional Area Network (SARAN) project. CFH's broad purposes are to: a) directly assist more than 50,000 disadvantaged households cross the digital divide from disconnected to broadband-connected; b) demonstrate the efficacy of a community-based approach to drive broadband adoption in low-income, educationally-challenged and disadvantaged populations in varied community settings; and c) develop a platform to share curriculums, tools, best practices, and collaborative relationships for ongoing social services work in these eight counties. The CFH and its partners will incorporate the experience and guidance of Community Technology practitioners in an approach that's interactive and intensive on a local scale but broad-reaching and replicable regionally. Thanks to the strength of CFH and its partners, the alliance has deep community roots and experience built on existing relationships, as well as the ability to sustain growth well beyond the project's funding period using various funding sources that target the CBO/NGO community. CFH is working with communities across the counties to develop public-interest broadband projects, promote community-aligned initiatives, and make high tech training and Web 2.0 services available to all citizens in the region. CFH will provide program guidance, reporting and strategic resourcing for all of following partners and strong supporters: Alabama Association of
Community Development Corporations Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind Community Foundation of South Alabama Southwest Alabama Workforce Development Council ' Region 9 Pew Internet & American Life Project continues to report a digital divide in America, especially among people over 65, those with little education, with household incomes of $25,000 or less, people with disabilities, African Americans, and those in rural areas. These are precisely the people that will be directly served by the SARAN project via its service rollout in the eight counties. The SARAN project service area has a combined population of 704,406 people situated in larger cities like Mobile, smaller cities like Monroeville, Evergreen, Jackson and Butler, and the rural communities of Chatom, Coden, Pleasant Groves, Vaughn just to name a few. Together the residents of these communities are 35% minorities (compared with US 12.4%); 32.9% have household incomes of less than $25K (compared with US 22%); 52.6% have a HS degree or less (compared with US 45.5%). CFH and its partners already provide a significant amount community service education and each organization wants to expand the reach of their offering to the rural areas via the use of technology. Before this goal can be reached, there is great amount computer/internet training that must delivered to the vulnerable populations so that they are both capable and receptive of a new mode of information delivery. SARAN closes this gap with it focus on first educating its user base and then deploying applications and services which give practical and meaningful use to their newly acquired knowledge. The collective experience of this team makes it possible to expand social services delivery to the service area via BTOP funding into areas of the region where expense and distance couldn't cost justify providing outreach service due to the high costs. In 8 of the counties, collaborations have already produced plans for public interest in projects that will provide public access to Computer Education Centers, a critical element of this deployment plan. CFH will recruit, train and prepare participants to be competitive in today’s information-centric workforce. Overall cost of the project is $ 1,461,264.40 and will train a minimum of 54000 persons during the three year BTOP funding period using the SARAN platform. CFH partners will work to reduce that cost and raise the program's value through collaborations with suppliers and local funding resources. CFH maximizes broadband adoption to the most vulnerable citizens in America through a network of urban, suburban, and rural partnerships. It leverages, to the best possible degree, Recovery Act projects that are expanding technology accessibility to the CFH regions.