Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name:  BOAT PEOPLE SOS, INC.

Project Title:  Multicultural Public Computer Center Network - Neighborhood Empowerment and Support through Teamwork

Project Type:  Public Computer Center

_______________________Executive Summary_______________________

a.) Statement of Need: The proposed Neighborhood Empowerment and Support through Teamwork Multicultural Public Computer Center Network (NEST Network) will bridge the digital divide by providing broadband access, training, education, and support for vulnerable and underserved immigrant and refugee community members of Greater Springfield, Massachusetts. Left out of the information age, these immigrants and refugees tend to fall further behind the average American in their access to services, benefits, and opportunities, and face decreasing prospects for employment, stable income, and self-sufficiency. Springfield is the third largest city in Massachusetts and fourth largest city in all of New England. Our city is one of the most diverse communities in the region, but also one of the areas of the state that have been hardest hit by the economic recession. As of January 2010, our area had an unemployment rate of 15.3% -- 50% higher than the state as a whole and three times higher than wealthy neighboring cities including Amherst (4.7%) and Northampton (5.9%). Moreover, members of large and growing immigrant and refugee groups, including an estimated 8,000 Vietnamese and 30,000 Russian speaking refugees and immigrants who call Springfield home, in our community have fared significantly worse than the average residents. Our staff estimate that the unemployment rate is closer to 25% among immigrant and refugee individuals who have limited language and transferable job skills; they are often the last to secure new jobs and the first to be laid off during difficult economic times. Due to language barriers, low levels of education, limited literacy, and poverty, our target population lacks access to broadband service. Refugees have been relocating and resettling in the Springfield area since the 1980s; among them the biggest populations came from Vietnam and various republics of the former Soviet Union. A large proportion of the local Southeast Asians are "Amerasians" -- children born to US servicemen and Vietnamese women during the Vietnam War. Viewed as children of the enemy, they were denied education by the post-war government in Vietnam. The majority of them cannot read or write in their own language. As a whole, 43% of the Vietnamese population in greater Springfield lives below 200% of the federal poverty level, according to Census 2000. An estimated 50% have no high school diploma and 75% speak English less than very well. According to Census 2,000 Massachusetts has the fifth highest population of Russian-Americans of all states nationwide about 232,000 people. The Russian speaking population in the Greater Springfield area is estimated at 30,000 individuals. Russian speaking community is very diverse by its ethnic, religious, and educational backgrounds. The majority of Russian speaking refugees came from different republics of former Soviet Union to flee religious persecution. Most of them are evangelical Baptists and Pentecostals. Due to prosecution in the old country many did not have access to higher education, and lots of the elder refugees have barely
finished eight classes in secondary school. Most of the refugees came from rural areas and even though basic literacy in native language is not an issue for Russian speaking community, many struggle to catch up with English proficiency and computer literacy. The same limitations influence refugees' access to higher paying jobs and reduce their chances to get out of poverty and become self-sufficient. The ability to have access to internet and technology has been positively correlated with the ability of refugees to wrestle with their marginalized status and re-establish themselves within their asylum context. Further studies concluded that refugees who do have access to internet are able to maintain links with their families in other parts of the US and the world as well as re-build networks in the new environment. The access to internet facilitates resettlement and integration as well as facilitates the maintenance and development of personal identities, and fostering psychological empowerment. Access to broadband internet will narrow the digital divide among this vulnerable population and bring greater opportunities for employment, education and civic participation. Our project addresses the particular needs of our target community by upgrading the existing Computer Center at BPSOS to a Broadband Public Computer Center (PCC), creating a second PCC at the Russian Community Association of Massachusetts in West Springfield, and creating two additional PCCs at nearby Senior Centers -- community anchor sites -- in Springfield. b.) Overall Approach: The NEST Network will provide culturally and linguistically appropriate broadband access points, training, education, and support resources to underserved immigrants and refugees. In particular, we will: 1. Expand and upgrade our existing CTC to include 10.0MBps connection, distance learning capabilities, digital media technologies, and assistive technologies; and set up new PCCs at the Russian Community Association in West Springfield and at two Senior Centers operated by the City of Springfield; 2. Provide computer training, broadband access, and support services to community members and specialized training to business owners; 3. Increase information and services available to PCC users by connecting the PCC to job banks, benefits check, tax e-filing and service provider websites; and 4. Offer information workshops, training seminars, and classes for workforce readiness, financial capability, and other relevant topics both on site and via distance learning. c). Area to be served: The NEST Network will serve residents of Greater Springfield, Massachusetts including neighborhoods on both sides of the Connecticut River which divides the city. The City of Springfield Action Plan for FY2009-2010 states that Springfield is a federal entitlement community, approved to receive funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and identified as a Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy Area (NRSA). As noted above, the unemployment rate of our community is significantly higher than both the state and national average. The poverty rate is 29.6 (223% above the U.S. average) and the average per capita income is 68% below U.S. average. BPSOS' office is located within a Block Group with 51% or higher low- to moderate-income population and serves clients who come from this population group. d.) Qualifications of the Applicant: BPSOS in Springfield is the local, community-based branch of a national Vietnamese-American organization. We have provided culturally and linguistically competent social services for immigrant and refugee families in greater Springfield since 2003. One of the first programs we established in 2003 was a small CTC; the CTC is still in operation, but in need of updating. As an organization founded and primarily staffed by Vietnamese immigrants and refugees, we have special insight into the needs to the target population. As a local branch of a national Vietnamese-American non-profit organization, we receive funding, training and technical assistance from our parent organization. Founded in 1980, the national organization has operated a network of CTCs in seven cities since 2000. In 2005-2009, with NTIA and Administration for
Children and Families (ACF) funding, we upgraded three of these CTCs with digital media technologies capabilities. Two grants from NTIA Public Telecommunications Facilities Program have allowed BPSOS to establish distance learning capabilities at three CTCs. On a national level, our parent organization operates the largest national network of Vietnamese-language mass media and supported the formation of the Vietnamese-American National Chamber of Commerce. BPSOS has managed multiple federal grants in the millions of dollars each. e) Jobs to be saved or created: This PCC will create twelve jobs: two at BPSOS-Springfield (Project Manager, Center Coordinator); two jobs at RCAM (Russian Community Association of Massachusetts) -West Springfield (Project Manager and Center Coordinator); a Center Coordinator at each of the two Senior Centers, as well as the addition of three Senior Aide positions through the Department of Labor’s Senior Community Service Employment Program. In addition, we expect that, as a result of the ability to access on-line employment services via Broadband and create resumes and cover letters, a large number of our clients will obtain employment. f.) Overall cost of the project: We are requesting $504,000 in federal funds to support the NEST network.