Applicant Name: L B DAVIS NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE

Project Title: Metro East Digital - Public Computer Centers

Project Type: Public Computer Center

Executive Summary

1.1 Need and Target Area

Metro East St. Louis (pop. 70,000, including the cities of Centreville, Madison and Venice and the villages of Alorton, Brooklyn, Cahokia and Washington Park) represents the most economically disadvantaged area in Illinois. Once known as an All American City (Look Magazine, 1960), East St. Louis has become "the most distressed small city in America" (U.S. HUD, 1990). The population of East St. Louis alone plummeted from nearly 83,000 (about 50% Black) in the 50s to less than 29,000 (98% Black) in 2008. The number of businesses went from 1,527 (mainly large industrial) in 1967 to 202 (mainly small) in 2008. Median household income is $21,324 (compared to $46,590 for Illinois); and has been declining in both real and inflationary dollars. 35% of the population is in poverty (compared to 10.7% for Illinois and 12.4% nationally), including over half all children. Unemployment is over 20%, by some estimates as high as 50%. One third of the population over 25 does not have a high school diploma or equivalency (compared to 19% for Illinois). Neighboring cities and villages share similar devastation, some with nearly 50% poverty, median income as low as $16,630, and over 40% of the population without a high school education. Germaine to BTOP are the technological hurdles faced by the community. A recent phone and mail survey indicates that 10 of 22 census tracks are at or below 40%. (The survey is biased towards those with Internet access until completion of the door-to-door component this spring; preliminary data collected through in-person surveys indicate rates around 25%.) Inadequate bandwidth extends to organizations and businesses in the community; many facilities depend on an expensive T1 line or DSL with limited upload speeds. As indicated in support letters, this has limited opportunities for public safety and health, negatively impacted efforts to attract new businesses, and restricted the ability of schools and the community college to effectively teach 21st century skills. For example, even though the only residential access all of Brooklyn has to the Internet is via cell phones and modems, the school has a T-1 line that they share with the community. While teachers have begun using the Internet to increase productivity, improve assessment, and establish better communications with parents and the community, limited bandwidth requires them to schedule time on the Internet to avoid gridlock. To allow students opportunities to complete homework and to facilitate parent access to online materials in support of their child's education, the school has an open door policy to the community as long as staff are in the building; staff often remain for extended hours to meet PCC demand. Webcam, blogging, and social networking between Spanish students in Brooklyn and English students at a sister school in Brazil has provided active learning in global communication and collaboration; one can only imagine what they would do with adequate bandwidth and access. Through a concerted and sustained decade-long effort by schools, libraries, the AmeriCorps program, and University of Illinois students, over 100 organizations throughout the community have computer labs.
These labs have provided an important bridge to basic computer and online access. However, basic access and limited bandwidth web browsing is no longer adequate to participate in a global information society that requires a more dynamic, engaged, and collaborative approach to engage with peers locally and at a distance. Too often innovators and early adopters are forced to leave the region to live and work in communities that afford them the ability to fully engage in today's broadband society. As a result, fewer innovators are available to apply emerging technologies that are essential for competitive advantage or to mentor others within the community on 21st century skills. 1.2 Overall Approach

Reversing the systemic marginalization of the Metro East region requires a comprehensive, multi-tiered approach that situates broadband access and skills development in the context of the community ethos. Metro East Digital will provide enhanced and expanded access to 21st century (broadband-centric) technologies by building on a foundation of existing community technology centers that are available, and utilized, by residents. The recent report Using Diffusion of Innovations Framework to Explain Communal Computing Facilities Adoption Among the Urban Poor (2008) clarifies that adoption of PCCs requires: * They have a high relative advantage for use; these centers will afford access to modern computers and software suites supporting creativity and innovation not readily available elsewhere, and will include accessibility stations to support use by all community members. The PCCs will be located within safe walking distance in neighborhoods; mobile labs built into soup buses and mobile healthcare units will bring access to critical health and wellness information while feeding the body of the most disadvantaged. * PCCs should be compatible with existing social values and environments; these centers will be customized to more closely align with the other activities of the hosting organization, i.e., community centers will have cyber lounges that facilitate easy transitions between high-energy activities, in-person dialog, and online engagement. Public health clinics will have specialized, convenient health information kiosks. Libraries, currently the most heavily used of the existing PCCs, will receive upgrades to their traditional computer labs, and new cyber labs supporting the creative and collaborative work are also a part of these social hubs. * Technology should be adoptable in phases (triability/divisibility); regular access to docents (including student interns and an existing extensive network of AmeriCorps) will provide critical just-in-time support for patrons to know 'where to start' and the encouragement/knowledge to take next steps when ready to move to new levels of use. Docents will supplement regularly scheduled live and online workshops and orientation sessions providing general 21st century skills development. A Community Help Desk will work closely with school districts, after school programs, and community members to anticipate needs and raise awareness of available digital resources to meet those needs. We learn best by doing, analyzing, talking, processing, and problem-solving (Learning for the 21st Century; http://www.21stcenturyskills.org), but 'Louder, slower, and more repetitive seems to be the pedagogy of choice of low-income schools like mine,' states Marco Torres (http://www.techlearning.com/article/13832). PCCs will be enhanced to provide the digital tools needed to support community doers. Digital media and environments will be provided to engage citizen journalists reporting on their communities and digital storytellers helping to capture the lived experiences, local knowledge, and rich histories of their community. A community web portal will be created to support live streamed and archived audio and video productions, as well as community blogs, wikis, and social networking sites to support civic engagement. Participatory GIS and citizen science tools combined with local and at-a-distance collaborations with domain experts will allow community members to analyze data describing the realities of their local community and to creatively problem-
solve by harnessing community assets and strategically reducing deficits. Provision of the broadband resources to locate, organize, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize global information sources will open up new worlds of research opportunities as residents advocate for their community. 1.3 Qualifications of Applicant Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House is a faith-based multi-purpose community center whose mission is to provide quality social and human services, social action and advocacy programs, and housing and economic development programs, to improve the quality of life for all persons of all ages in the Metro East region. Neighborhood House seeks to provide direct services and social action models that empower and strengthen individuals and families to meet their own needs individually and collectively. Neighborhood House has been serving the area for more than 100 years, operates on an $8 million budget, and actively seeks and procures state and federal funding for social and workforce development. They currently manage the region's AmeriCorps program and have partnered with the University of Illinois for the past 10 years to establish more than 100 public computer centers in the target service area. 1.4 Bottom Line For $9.8 million Metro East Digital project will save or create 107 jobs and serve 8400 people through a neighborhood-based network of PCCs.