Executive Summary

Statement of Problem and Areas to be Served

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. In a mail and telephone phone survey conducted on behalf of Metro East Digital for this grant application, the estimated broadband adoption rate for the entire target Metro East St. Louis area is less than 40%. In three of our target communities (Brooklyn, Madison and Venice; census tracts 4006, 4007, 4009.03, 5021, 5045) there is no broadband service available other than via cellular phone or modem. In the remainder of the region two census tracts indicated adoption at or below 25% (Centreville 5027 and 5028, and four census tracts indicated adoption at or below 30% (Alorton 5025, East St. Louis 5009, Washington Park 5022 and 5024.01). Because the surveys are based on voluntary responses to a mailed survey, and voluntary responses to a phone survey (for which only 35% of the randomly selected sample were associated with listed phone numbers) we expect that additional, if not all, census tracts actually fall below a 30% adoption rate. Within the next 60 days a door-to-door survey will be conducted to obtain more accurate rates (this mode of survey could not be safely conducted in the winter months).

Overall Innovative Approach

Metro East Digital is taking a comprehensive community approach to broadband adoption by infusing broadband applications, promotion, and awareness where the people are. Initial attempts to address the digital divide must necessarily concentrate on basic access to new technologies. However, education, risk tolerance, and socio-economic status are each determinants in the ability to fully participate. Without the competitive advantage that can come from the efforts of innovators and early adopters within a community, the marginalized community is condemned to a perpetual dependency on outsiders who benefit from such an advantage. Bridging the digital divide sustainably requires more than just introduction of technology; it requires a multi-tiered approach that fosters in-community
innovators and early adopters. Just as important, it is critical to provide the public safety and health services to provide the employment/small business opportunities that help to keep those innovators and early adopters in the community. In addition it is critical to infuse meaningful application of the broadband adoption in disadvantaged populations, even for those who have already adopted. Old patterns of technology use need to be unlearned to allow learning of 21st century patterns of technology engagement. Therefore Metro East Digital will promote broadband INSIDE the community. Rather than launching an expensive media blitz promotion, we will use a multi-faceted approach to take the roadband applications TO the community through ' subsidies for household computers and network access fees, coupled with foundational broad-based training efforts; ' marketplace literacy video training to enable even low-literacy residents to learn how to be a savvy consumer and how to economically benefit from broadband access, in partnership with an on-going Marketplace Literacy effort out of the University of Illinois, initially implemented in India; ' on-line health information promotion at health clinics via publicly accessible computers and wireless connections, coordinated by a professional health educator; ' through a SUstainable DEvelopment wiki project to enable even low-literacy residents to participate in and contribute high quality local information for community planning and development; ' workforce and business development in broadband-related skills; ' a small business incubator, shared smart offices, and production facilities for Internet- based or -supporting businesses (e.g., Internet retail sales, software testing, support centers, website development, animation and multimedia development, application development); ' innovative youth and adult community programs in digital media, citizen journalism and community archiving by leveraging existing programs such as the Village Theatre in Centreville, and University of Illinois expertise; ' professional development for lead teachers and administrators (using a train-the-trainer model supported by the International Society for Technology Education) in classroom application of broadband-based tools such as Internet access, and social networking for homework assistance and community with parents; ' intensive 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. Qualifications of Applicant Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House is a United Methodist 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. For this project they are again collaborating with the University of Illinois, as well as Southwestern Illinois College and International Network Technologies to implement an area-wide broadband service model that will provide access and opportunities for small business development, community redevelopment, education, public safety, and enhanced healthcare. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) is home the Prairienet community network project, founded in 1993 to provide early Internet access to the community. Prairienet received a TOP grant in 1997 to foster sustained Internet adoption through home computer access. Building on that history, GSLIS extended its public engagement to East
St. Louis in 2000, specializing in PCCs for community development. Other UIUC faculty have extensive experience in marketplace literacy (Madhu Viswanathan has received awards for his community-based work), sustainable development (leveraging an existing Extension project led by Julia Bello Bravo), participatory GIS for citizen planning (Jon Gant advises internationally on the topic), community archiving, and citizen journalism. Southwestern Illinois College is the largest community college south of Chicago and serves 26,000 students, at three campuses and 20 off-campus sites, including the East St. Louis Community College Center. More than 2,400 of those students reside in the target under-served region. In addition to increasing adoption rates to at least 60%, and promoting substantive broadband applications for the 35% of the population that has already adopted broadband, Metro East Digital will create or save 120 jobs for an overall project cost of $11 million.