Executive Summary

Problem Statement: AL currently ranks 49th in the US in percent of individuals living in households with Internet access (61.7%; US Census, Oct 2009). Most of Alabama's larger communities are well-positioned to adopt high-speed telecommunications technologies. Residents of Alabama's rural communities and its most vulnerable populations are not in this position. Because of lower levels of educational attainment, and economic, social and physical isolation, AL's rural areas are exactly the places where broadband is most needed. Likewise, its most vulnerable populations (individuals who possess communications barriers due to disabilities or language, those who have been disenfranchised from economic resources, those who lack transportation options due to age or health, and individuals with limited incomes) have the most to gain from the adoption of broadband. Innovative Approach, Key Partners, Service Areas and Qualifications: This initiative will address this digital divide by boosting broadband demand, usage, and subscribership throughout the state, especially among AL's rural and most vulnerable populations. The Alabama Department of Economic & Community Affairs (ADECA) / Connecting Alabama will provide overall project administration and state-level project marketing. The Economic & Community Development Institute (ECDI, a partnership of Auburn University and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System- ACES) will develop 10 training modules and coordinate delivery of sessions. Training facilities include: various locations throughout AL utilizing ACES’s existing mobile computer lab (22 laptops) with wireless Internet access (via a satellite trailer with mobile wireless air card); 19 community college facilities (representing 6 colleges); 26 ESL facilities; 8 Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) facilities (fully accessible to support computer needs of the world's most comprehensive education, rehab and employment system serving children and adults who are deaf, blind and multidisabled); and facilities on Poarch Band of Creek Indians (AL's only federally-recognized Indian tribe) land. ACES, community college, and AIDB IT staff will provide on-site IT support. ECDI's 67 County Extension Coordinators (CECs) will deliver at least 3 training modules/year to target audiences to boost local broadband usage, demand and subscribership in AL's 67 counties, and their individual County Extension Advisory Boards (CEABs; leaders of community anchor institutions - CAIs - in each county) will advise local broadband training and awareness efforts and help select training modules to match local human, community and economic development needs. CECs will also deliver ESL training in 26 counties where ACES currently has ESL programs. The Extension program based at Alabama A&M University, a historically-black university, will also support ACES efforts. The BEACON Consortium of the AL Community College System (comprised of Bevill State, Bishop State, Central Alabama, Faulkner State, Snead State and Trenholm State Technical College) will provide local and regional awareness campaigns and project marketing support and computer-equipped training sites. Two of these colleges
(representing 6 campuses) are historically-black colleges. A partnership with AIDB will extend accessible training to the Institute's regular trainees and other disabled members of the public at-large. AIDB experts will serve in an advisory capacity to ensure training is accessible to target populations. AIDB staff will also deliver (or assist with) accessible training offered at the Institute's 8 regional training locations. Additional partners in the project, assisting through in-kind third party contributions, include: AL's 22 Community Action Agencies (part of the AL Community Service Block Grant program); the Alabama Community Leadership Network (ACLN) representing 80 local adult and youth leadership development programs throughout AL; the Poarch Band of Creek Indians and Creek Indian Enterprises; the Alabama Rural Action Commission (ARAC); the Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama; and Alabama AARP. The Community Action Agencies, AIDB, the Poarch Creek Indians, HICA, ACES, Alabama AARP and ACLN will provide marketing and promotion of broadband usage to; identification and outreach to; and opportunities for partners to provide targeted training to support broadband adoption among: low-income, disabled, Native American, Hispanic, ESL, senior citizen and youth (respectively) vulnerable populations throughout AL. ARAC will provide targeted marketing for broadband awareness and training activities utilizing its Healthcare, Education, and Economic Development Committees and serve as an outreach entity to AL's rural communities. ACLN will provide broadband guidance to community leaders and provide the initiative with feedback from community leadership groups. While entities in other states have individually led the charge to increase broadband awareness, usage, demand and subscribership, and smaller-scale efforts have been championed by local community-based entities, the proposed initiative allows for a more sustainable training and awareness effort that is broad in scope yet targeted to key vulnerable populations and communities who represent potential growth markets for broadband services. It strategically engages 3 key statewide community, workforce, and economic development entities; 7 statewide networks serving rural and vulnerable populations; and 425 unique, targeted, and local CAIs to create a comprehensive support base. Further, it leverages diverse strengths of existing and uniquely-qualified statewide networks of expertise in: community / economic development; civic engagement; workforce development and adult education; local training delivery; accessible training design / technology; outreach to AL's most vulnerable communities; and Extension IT allowing for more effective and impactful leveraging of limited state and federal resources. Further, while other awareness campaigns tend to be broad, local OR targeted, the proposed project includes a statewide awareness campaign sponsored by the Governor's office to boost statewide awareness of the benefits of broadband and subscribership, accompanied by 8 targeted regional campaigns and efforts by partner entities to engage vulnerable populations and emphasize relevant broadband applications and address the needs of CAIs and job creation and training entities; each targeted campaign will be consistent with the statewide campaign. In addition, while most existing broadband training programs are static in nature, the proposed program is dynamic and will be continually updated based on feedback from a network of existing ties to 425 CAIs, representing all of AL's 67 counties; in addition, material can be easily-tailored to meet local needs and leverage locally-available assets. Finally, rather than taking a "one-size-fits-all" approach, this initiative is built upon existing local assets. It uses trusted CECs as trainers and project facilitators, who will remain in the community and continue to champion the program after grant funds are gone, to ensure local assets, resources and institutions are engaged to support sustainable broadband adoption. It will be championed by CECs, CEABs and other partners in a network of 425 CAIs who have intimate knowledge of communities and connections to existing assets.
Subscribership, Jobs Created / Saved, Reach, and Budget: Project partners will undertake collaborative and strategic efforts to help boost AL's current 61.7% subscribership rate to 70.0% by the end of the project period (Sept 30, 2012), with "29.7% of this growth being a direct result of stimulus-funded efforts to increase broadband subscribership. This increase in the broadband subscribership growth rate translates into a projected increase of 109,551 new (sustainable) broadband subscribers (or an estimated 46,029 household subscriptions) over the 2-year period and a projected increase in annual broadband subscription sales of $30,738,167, which translates into a total increase of 349 jobs for AL's residents. A total match of 49.5% (representing a collective contribution of $1,158,978 by project partners) makes this a wise investment of federal resources. While the total cost/new subscriber of $27.56 is reasonable, the actual federal request of $13.91/new subscriber is an exceptional investment. In terms of the requested amount of $1,181,348, this translates into a federal investment of only $3,385/job. ECDI, the Community College System's BEACON Consortium and AIDB will collectively contribute matching contributions of $1,158,978. Project awareness campaigns will reach an estimated 1,512,500 Alabamians per year, and training programs will reach 11,500 potential new broadband subscribers.