Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY AFFAIRS, ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF

Project Title: Alabama Rural Action Commission (ARAC) Regional PCC/PC2U Grant Program

Project Type: Public Computer Center

Executive Summary

Within the State of Alabama, there is a large digital divide between citizens that are members of broadband unserved, underserved, or vulnerable populations, and citizens that are not. This results in a disproportionate number of Alabamians lacking the available technological tools that can grant them access to better education, higher paying jobs, and inclusion in our ever-evolving technological society. According to Education Week Magazine, Alabama ranks 43rd in the nation in high school graduation rate, with only 61% of its youth graduating from High School. And the unemployment rates for the state are even more daunting, with a staggering 22 of Alabama’s counties reporting unemployment rates of 15% or higher. Our state unemployment rate, according to the Alabama Department of Industrial Relations, currently stands at 11.1%, which is even higher than the national average. Alabama, like many other rural states, has various “dead zones” where mobile data service and high speed Internet are either not available at all or deliver low bandwidth that falls beneath the tiered classifications as set forth by the FCC in late 2008. Rural healthcare, economic development, agriculture and other areas are at a distinct disadvantage due to broadband inaccessibility. A program that allowed even the most broadband unserved residents of this state the opportunity to have accessibility to broadband could usher in waves of change for Alabama, changes that could be replicated nationwide. These figures are discouraging and require immediate action in order to make a meaningful impact. Our project team proposes an innovative and long-lasting solution to these problems - The Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA), in conjunction with the Alabama Rural Action Commission (ARAC) and the Central Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission (CARPDC) seeks to create a competitive solicitation program that will establish public computer centers in the eight (8) ARAC regions across the State of Alabama. The Montgomery City County Public Library System (MCCPL) will serve as the pilot for this program, in which both an expanded public computer center (PCC)-Rosa L. Parks Branch and a mobile public computer center (PC2U) will be created using funds specified for this pilot program. Each kiosk located in the centers will provide information about services in the region through the introduction of resource cards that are attached to each kiosk. The resource cards, as created by ADECA, with the Department of Human Resources (DHR) and the Department of Industrial Relations (DIR), will include telephone numbers, addresses, and websites for individuals to contact to acquire a variety of state services. PCC clients can use this information to contact and apply for the appropriate service that they require. A second component of this model program is the implementation of PC2U centers, so named because of the manner in which broadband accessibility is brought directly to individuals lacking it. PC2U will be housed in a mobile transportation unit equipped with the same computers and necessary equipment and peripherals that clients would be able to use in
a traditional library. Each PC2U will consist of between 10-24 computer station kiosks, and internet would be received via satellite in regions that currently do not have wireless capabilities. The PC2U vehicle purchased for this pilot program would be an energy efficient vehicle utilizing bio fuels. Solar panels affixed to the roof of the vehicle will ensure that solar energy is harnessed and used properly. Implementing an energy efficient mobile center creates another opportunity to educate the public, specifically disadvantaged populations in broadband underserved regions, on the importance and impact of energy efficiency and sustainability. Each vehicle is also ADA compliant and can accommodate individuals with various disabilities. Each PC2U would serve as a hub for the surrounding rural regions that encompass them. A schedule of training programs and services would be established within each region and would be conducted by community partners that could be found in the ARAC regions such as: local technical/community colleges and/or the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. The schedules set by each region will be revisited periodically to determine if modifications need to be made in order to better serve the varying needs of each region. The PC2U center will enhance the capabilities of supporting other agencies that address the needs of disadvantaged students, senior citizens, displaced workers, individuals with disabilities, and individuals in broadband unserved and underserved regions of the state. Activation of these centers will establish connectivity and mission enhancement between the DHR, DIR, AEMA, The Alabama Department of Education, Cooperative Extension, the Alabama Public Library Service, Easter Seals, and other state and local institutions. The Montgomery City County Public Library System, the site of our pilot program, is located in the South Central Alabama Action Commission. A total of 11 counties make up this ARAC region. The Cooperative Extension established in each county would work with the region to develop a training schedule. The PC2U would then follow that established schedule to ensure that programs and services would be offered in rural regions across all 11 counties in the SCAAC region. Training programs and services offered would focus on four distinct areas: "Workforce Development" "Education" "E-Commerce" "General Computer Interest Counties within each ARAC Region across the state would have the opportunity to apply for funding for both a traditional public computer center and a PC2U mobile computer center. At least one award would be made for each region, resulting in a total of at least seven (7) awards across the state (the Montgomery City County Public Library Pilot Program would be funded through the original BTOP grant). The awards made within each region would be based on carefully selected criteria for consideration. This project offers tremendous benefits for the public: 1) The implementation of this proposed project will stimulate demand for broadband technology in the unserved and underserved regions. Participants in the programs offered through this project will express a greater demand for the improvement and advancement of broadband technology in their regions. 2) Many residents of broadband unserved and underserved regions of this state lack the skill set necessary to compete in the job marketplace. Due to the lack of broadband accessibility, they are also unable to apply for jobs in other regions, both locally and nationally, that require internet accessibility in order to complete the application process. Through the proposed project these residents will receive job and computer related skills training that will broaden their breadth of knowledge and afford them with the same opportunities that are currently available to residents of broadband served regions of the state. 3) Our project directly aligns with the Broadband Initiative already established by the Governor of Alabama. The primary purpose of the Alabama Broadband Initiative is to provide broadband accessibility and services to all residents of the State of Alabama, including those currently unserved and underserved populations of the state. This
project complements action currently taken by the state to improve the broadband accessibility and capabilities of the State of Alabama. 4) The State of Alabama also implemented a Workforce Development Initiative to improve workforce development services offered in the state. By maintaining a collaborative community partnership with Workforce Development, this project also supports and enhances the Governor's goals of creating a cohesive cluster of workforce development services for the residents of Alabama. 5) Lastly, this proposed project will greatly benefit the disadvantaged populations of this state, including, but not limited to, the broadband unserved and underserved regions of Alabama. By creating a competitive solicitation grant program that will expand a traditional public computer center and implement a mobile public computer center, regions will be able to expand the services currently utilized by disadvantaged populations in their regions. Disadvantaged populations are unique in this regard in though they may reside in broadband served regions they may still lack opportunities to obtain broadband accessibility. The total expected cost of this project is $7,152,000, which includes $2,152,000, or 30.08% in matching funds, reducing our federal request to $5,000,000.