Applicant Name: AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Project Title: Equipment and Training for Rural Alabama Public Computer Centers

Project Type: Public Computer Center

Executive Summary

Alabama has many small libraries, most in rural areas, that are able to provide very limited public computing capacity to the communities they serve. Because the household populations served by these small, rural public facilities are less likely to have home computers or broadband service, the need for additional public computing capacity and access to broadband is extraordinarily great in many rural communities. To better understand and address this problem, Auburn University Outreach (AUO) developed a database of rural public libraries with seven (7) or fewer public computer terminals with Internet access. Online and telephone interviews were conducted with each library to ascertain needs for additional computers, current bandwidth and wireless capabilities, and information technology management practices. The libraries surveyed are located in 28 of Alabama's 67 counties. These libraries have an average population service area of 9,194 persons, an average annual budget of just $67,000, and an average staff size of 2 employees who earn an average annual salary of $19,288. On average, the libraries surveyed currently have 6 computers. The results of this survey were compiled and analyzed by AUO in cooperation with the staff of the Alabama Public Library Service (APLS), the legislatively-designated statewide coordinating agency for Alabama's public libraries. The analysis informed several important conclusions: 1) some libraries would prefer that additional public computers are portable or notebook computers to allow flexibility in their placement and use within space-constrained library premises; 2) some libraries (approximately one-third of those surveyed) need wireless service to facilitate the expansion of their public computer center capacity within their current space limitations; 3) additional public computer capacity can be freed up by expanding library computing capacity in nearby schools; 4) some libraries have unused space that can be used for enhanced broadband services, like an audio-visual conferencing facility; and 6) a primary usage for the public computers in these libraries is workforce related, allowing users to search online for jobs, develop resumes and other career development materials, and applying for employment, training, or related assistance. In response to these findings, and in addition to generally expanding the public computer capacity of each facility with the purchase of 1,007 total additional workstations, we are proposing: 1) purchase of wireless routers; 2) installation of audiovisual conferencing centers at a limited number of libraries, facilities that can be used for workforce training, distance learning, and telemedicine and pharmaceutical consultation offered by Auburn University's Harrison School of Pharmacy and School of Nursing; and 3) inclusion of funding for selected school library computing centers in adjacent school districts, thereby shifting some demand for public library computer time (principally by students) to school-based computer centers. A key objective of this proposed project is to provide each library an initial on-site and in-depth consultation with wireless engineers from Auburn University and Tuskegee University to assess current
broadband equipment and facilities, and then to evaluate options for improving public computer center capacity through this project. This initial evaluation will include an economic assessment of current broadband access service options available to each library. Sometimes a service provider or level of service chosen years ago is not the most economical or serviceable option today. The initial consultation will also evaluate the equipment needs for each library and determine the appropriateness of each facility for establishment of an audio-visual conference facility. In order to ensure that the equipment and facilities provided by this project are sustainable and compatible with existing and future planned architecture of computing for Alabama's public libraries, the technical support staff of APLS will be asked to evaluate and approve all equipment, specifications and plans offered to libraries under this project. The technical support staff of APLS will also participate in the planning of library staff training. To ensure that each library's technology plan reflects the current state-of-the-art in library sciences, the staff of Auburn University's Libraries and Office Office of Information Technology (OIT) will be asked to review and make recommendations for adherence to professional practices and standards. Auburn University, through its Wireless Engineering Research and Education Center (WEREC), has previously demonstrated its organizational and technical readiness to undertake this project through the successful installation of wireless computer facilities and equipment in the public library and schools of rural Uniontown, Alabama. That experience also created recognition of the critical importance of training small library and school personnel' most of whom lack full-time, close-by technical support staff'in the use and maintenance of wireless broadband computing centers. Auburn University intends to provide training that will help library staff become more effective troubleshooters of broadband computing facilities, allowing them to solve more minor problems before having to call in technical support from APLS or other providers. Through this project, Auburn University intends to contribute to the goal of increased employment in a variety of ways: 1) by enhancing smaller libraries' public computing facilities in a manner that makes more computers more accessible to job seekers; 2) by providing faster and better computer broadband computing access, libraries will give users access to a wider array of online training and workforce development content; 3) the hiring of wireless engineers and student interns from Auburn University and Tuskegee University to consult with libraries, install, and train library staff will create new jobs; and 4) the widespread use of student interns to assist wireless engineers will help these students build resumes and career credentials that include real-world experiences that will increase their prospects for employment. The total cost for this proposed project is $5.8 million. Auburn University is providing most of the required matching funds, $713 thousand, while the library recipients themselves will provide in-kind contribution of $449 thousand for matching purposes.