Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: HOUSTON, CITY OF

Project Title: City of Houston WeCAN Sustainable Broadband Adoption Initiative

Project Type: Sustainable Broadband Adoption

_______________________ Executive Summary_______________________

a) Market research indicates that nearly 38 percent of Houstonians access the Internet via broadband or some other high-speed connection, but the City of Houston has identified 27 communities where subscription rates average just 21 percent. Demographics in these areas correspond with findings from the 2009 Pew Internet and American Life Project, which highlighted several indicators with high negative correlation to broadband adoption and usage. Per Pew, at-risk groups at risk included African-Americans, those with a high school diploma or less, and senior citizens. These groups include individuals and families who live in poverty, making broadband access and computers a luxury that remains out of reach. Others see little reason to go online: the Pew study found that 50 percent of non-broadband users cited relevance as an issue. Without access to broadband, the skills to take advantage of this access and the awareness of its benefits, these vulnerable populations will remain on the periphery of 21st century society. While the City has plans and resources to address this problem in 10 of the 27 target neighborhoods, SBA funding is needed to expand digital literacy training, broadband awareness and equipment availability for neighborhoods and residents in need. b) Through its Digital Inclusion Initiative, WeCAN, the City has already begun addressing the community's digital needs through provision of fundamental computer skills training at Houston Public Library branches and other sites. In addition, the City's WeCAN Works program offers an innovative digital literacy and workforce readiness public/private partnership that provides training to the underserved, unskilled, and underemployed for sustainable career paths. This program serves a limited number of unemployed and underemployed individuals with digital literacy and workforce-readiness training, but can be expanded with BTOP assistance. The City has also created a community resource portal to allow easy access to quality of life information and e-learning programs and opportunities; however, the portal is not widely marketed and sees limited usage. Building on these efforts, the City will address the community's broadband adoption issues by: Accelerating expansion of the WeCAN Works program, broadening its reach across Houston by adding 17 new neighborhoods to the target area above the 10 already planned for WeCAN offerings during the project period and doubling the annual number of trainees to 30,000; Launching an aggressive, focused marketing effort designed to increase awareness of the benefits of broadband and BTOP-funded opportunities, including WeCAN Works and the public computer centers for which funding is requested under a separate BTOP application from the City; Increasing understanding and usage of the WeCAN community portal, which offers content that is educational, relevant (including neighborhood-centric information in a variety of languages), and might not otherwise be accessible; and Equipping thousands of residents with the opportunity to buy computer hardware and software at reduced cost or even for free through a discounted community-purchase
program that offers additional subsidies for hardware and software purchases as a reward for completion of digital literacy and workforce readiness training classes and sharing of technical knowledge gained with others; in addition, local school districts will acquire 500 computer/modem packages and accompanying software for take-home use by students who lack home Internet access. This project is innovative for its comprehensive combination of workforce-relevant digital literacy training, marketing and community outreach, and provision of necessary tools and resources to ensure increased and sustainable broadband access and utilization. By addressing the problem on three fronts ' awareness, training and assistance with equipment acquisition ' the City proposes to increase home broadband subscription rates in the targeted neighborhoods from 21 percent to 40 percent. c) The project covers 27 neighborhoods in Houston, America's fourth-largest city with a population of more than 2.25 million, based on estimates from the City's Planning and Development Department. While 10 of these neighborhoods are to receive WeCAN training opportunities in the near future, the other 17 can be included in an accelerated approach if this proposal for funding is approved. The 27 neighborhoods targeted by this project have higher-than-normal concentrations of vulnerable populations, and only 21 percent of respondents to a 2009 market survey reported having home broadband access ' the remaining 79 percent lacking high-speed online access at home will be a focus of this project. The 27 neighborhoods include about one-quarter of Houston's overall population of 2.25 million, based on estimates from the City's Planning Department and American Community Survey data. Median income in the target neighborhoods ranges roughly from $21,000 to $38,000; the highest is still more than 10 percent less than the citywide figure of more than $42,600. African-Americans make up 36 percent of the population versus 24.5 percent citywide, and the target neighborhoods are 59 percent Hispanic, much higher than the citywide Hispanic presence of 41.9 percent. Forty-three percent of households earn less than $25,000 annually. Eighteen percent of target area residents are 55 or older, and 31 percent are less than 18 year old (this age group has nearly a one-in-three chance of living below the poverty line, according to ACS data). Further, many of these youth are likely to underachieve in educational pursuits. Statistics show that more than 50 percent of Houston-area students do not graduate from high school, while nearly 30% of Houston-area adults 25 years of age or older are without a GED or high school diploma. The project proposes to improve workforce readiness and job-related digital literacy, increase residents' use of the Internet for non-work purposes (i.e. social services), equip people with the hardware and software necessary to make best use of online resources, and ultimately raise home broadband subscription rates in the target neighborhoods. d) Qualifications of the applicant -- The City of Houston is well-equipped to implement this project, as evidenced by its record of establishing partnerships with the educational, private and non-profit sectors to encourage workforce development and digital skills training. As indicated above, the City's Digital Inclusion Initiative has already begun to address the digital divide. With an annual operating budget of $4.2 billion, the City has sufficient resources to dedicate to BTOP-related efforts. While the recent economic downturn has impacted the City's revenue streams, digital inclusion remains a priority for the City, which will leverage its efforts with community partners to ensure success. Further, the City already operates a volunteer program and also has strong relationships with area news media, both important foundations for moving forward with the proposed program of work. e) Jobs to be saved or created -- The program will create two full-time jobs (an Outreach and Operations Manager and a Community Portal Coordinator), along with 15 part-time instructor positions equal to 4 FTEs. In addition to these 6 FTEs, using estimates
based on the Council of Economic Advisors' method, the City estimates indirect job creation of 25.3 jobs/years and another 17.7 induced jobs as a result of the proposed investment. f) Overall project cost -
- Projected project costs are $4,509,190, including $3,124,190 in requested federal funding and $1,385,000 in cash and in-kind match from local sources.