Boat People SOS, Inc. (BPSOS) will facilitate broadband access for vulnerable and underserved residents of Southeast Texas, including the Cities of Houston and Port Arthur, including low income, ESL speakers, seniors, youth, and persons with disabilities who have been impacted by Hurricane Ike and stressed by the economic downturn. Our Neighborhood Empowerment and Support through Teamwork - Community Technology Center (NEST-CTC) Project will equip and support a network of community partners who will facilitate reliable broadband access to this vulnerable community in order to support the State of Texas' efforts to make certain that the economic and social benefits of broadband connectivity are extended to all Texans. We request $1,190,408 in federal funding to contribute to a total project cost of $1,668,808. By facilitating a network of community technology centers (CTC) via key community service agencies, this project will address barriers to information and services faced by our target population, and will significantly contribute to the progress of some of the most vulnerable and underserved populations in Texas. This project addresses the needs of some 100,000 Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in the Houston metropolitan area and surrounding Gulf Coast communities. Outside of California, the Houston metropolitan area is home to the largest Vietnamese population in the United States. Over 130,000 Vietnamese live in Houston and the upper Texas Gulf Coast areas. While a majority of this population lives in the Alief and Parkplace Super Neighborhoods in Houston, where our branch office is located, there are many isolated communities throughout the Gulf Coast and Bay area. As a whole, Vietnamese make up the largest refugee population in this area. Despite the large size of the population, many Vietnamese individuals and families face barriers to accessing broadband services. Hurdles to broadband include poverty, as well as linguistic barriers, including limited English proficiency and low literacy rates, and lack of understanding on how to use broadband. These barriers have been aggravated by the devastation to homes, livelihoods and communal support caused by Hurricane Ike and other recent disasters. In particular, there are several vulnerable subpopulations ' including seniors and Amerasians (children of US servicemen and Vietnamese women) - who face even greater barriers to services: individuals with a history of trauma, 'reeducation camp' survivors who experience cognitive deficits related to experiences of torture. Language barrier as a cause of disparity in accessing services has been recognized as a national issue. According to the U.S. census bureau, in Harris County, TX, 62.2% of the Vietnamese population speaks English less than 'very well.' This language barrier prevents many from utilizing range of services and activities that have moved online in recent years. Furthermore, some in our target population have very low literacy levels. Many Amerasians and older Vietnamese women were denied an education in Vietnam. Cultural isolation poses an additional barrier in access to services.
The Vietnamese community is very culture-conscious and reluctant to seek help outside of their ethnic community. The Vietnamese community is, therefore, highly isolated from other ethnic communities as well as the mainstream population and fearful of reaching out for assistance to mainstream community institutions in Houston that offer public broadband access. Poverty and overwhelming survival concerns may exacerbate linguistic and cultural barriers. A significant number of Vietnamese families are classified as low-income. According to the 2004 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, 14% of Vietnamese in the U.S. are poor, exceeding the national average, the White average, and the Asian average. Thus, many of our clients do not have substantial financial resources to afford broadband. This is especially the case for families and individuals living in coastal counties that were recently hit by Hurricane Ike. In these areas our target population's grip on self-sufficiency, tenuous even before Hurricane Ike, has become even more challenging in the recent economic downturn. According to our service experience over the past four years, there are still many households in Houston that lack access to broadband. Despite the tremendous need for broadband access, there are very few locations in Houston capable of providing access to broadband in a linguistically and culturally accessible atmosphere for the community. There are no such locations in Port Arthur, Texas. Our proposal will leverage BPSOS' experience with our CTC in Houston and equip and support four community service agencies (Vietnamese Community of Houston and Vicinities, Vietnamese Culture and Science Association, VN TeamWork and Northwest Senior Citizens Association) and one community anchor institution in Houston (Nha Viet Library) with the technology and staff needed to provide the community access to broadband through specialized CTCs. This proposal will also equip BPSOS' office in Port Arthur with a CTC to serve the vulnerable and isolated Vietnamese community in that area. Each CTC will operate with similar operating procedures but will offer expertise and services to a unique portion of the population including youth, job-seekers and elders, among others. BPSOS will use our expertise in running CTCs and our proven Neighborhood Empowerment and Support through Teamwork (NEST) capacity building model to provide training and technical assistance to these partners and help them sustain their operations after the funding period ends. We believe that the usage of computers and broadband will have a very positive impact on the functioning of the community as a whole. Specifically, access to broadband will enhance our community's prospect for social integration, education and ultimately for healthy, self-sufficient and economically stable lives. By leading a coalition of the few culturally and linguistically competent service providers in Southeast Texas, BPSOS is setting this project up for success. Furthermore, as the local branch of a national community-based organization with a 30-year track record of success in serving the Vietnamese community and experience setting up and sustain seven CTCs nationwide, BPSOS will leverage our own experience, as well as the best practices and lessons learned by BPSOS branch offices across the country.