Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: NORTH LAWNDALE EMPLOYMENT NETWORK

Project Title: Lawndale Network Training Centers

Project Type: Public Computer Center

_______________________ Executive Summary _______________________

Two years ago, the City of Chicago released The City that NetWorks, a comprehensive document announcing some of the most innovative strategies for developing digital equity across the city and in local neighborhoods. One of the recommendations included the development of Digital Excellence Demonstration Communities that would be a test bed of ideas; model how digital excellence can be practically achieved; and, demonstrate how digital excellence can lead to digital transformation. The report also asserted that these digital demonstration projects "should aspire to reach every household, business and institution in each target neighborhood with an affordable bundle of hardware, software and training that will enable them to participate meaningfully in digital activities" (The City that NetWorks 2007, p. 54). For the last seven years, Chicago's North Lawndale community has been leading citywide efforts to bring digital opportunities to local residents and institutions. Six years ago, the Center for Neighborhood Technology launched a wireless community network project in partnership with local leaders. Funding was provided through the Technology Opportunities Program (TOP), a former federal initiative to spur thinking on the beneficial use for digital technology. North Lawndale civic leaders and residents were engaged throughout the project to provide input on how to merge technology with social problems impacting the community. At the end of the grant period, the technical assets for the project were transferred to community partners that have continued to sustain the initial project. Today, the Lawndale Wireless Community Network (LWCN) project is still fully functional. Over 500 residents are receiving free Internet access through the project, 350 residents have received refurbished hardware and 100 youth are marketing and training their neighbors on the Internet. With generous, multi-year support from the Motorola Foundation in 2007 and input from over 40 community and civic leaders, the network architecture is being expanded to accommodate more than 3,000 families and 15 community hot spots that will support public access. Over the past three years, 40 project partners have formally organized as the Lawndale Wireless Community Network Collaborative and the North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN), the lead applicant, has been working with these partners to create a solid business plan sustaining the network beyond grant funds. A critical element of the project's success is related to the integration of public computing centers into the program model and their ability to support more than 30,000 individuals per year irrespective of their age, technical experience, literacy level, physical or mental abilities. Interviews with community residents and input from the collaborative have identified public computing centers as training and engagement hubs that will serve to increase broadband adoption and utilization efforts. NLEN is requesting $779,029 from the BTOP program under the statute of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to strengthen the network of local computing centers that will distribute information about the existing wireless network to local residents,
offer standardized digital literacy training that help people improve the quality of their lives, support residents in their purchase and maintenance of computer hardware, and connect residents to human service and employment resources. NLEN will also utilize BTOP funds to improve the ability of these public computing centers to support small business owners and their employees that have limited to no experience on the range of software applications that can help increase their competitiveness and profitability, thus producing more jobs within this distressed community. Chicago's North Lawndale community has a population of 41,768, down 11.69% from 1990. The neighborhood has a growing Hispanic population, currently 4.5%, but is overwhelmingly '94.2%'African American. Young people compose a major segment of North Lawndale's population: the average age of North Lawndale residents is 22, and nearly half of its residents are under the age of nineteen.(1) Over the past three decades, North Lawndale has faced a severe socio-economic decline due to the flight of industry from the neighborhood, rapid deterioration of housing stock and businesses, and rising crime rates. Today, despite a movement toward redevelopment and the emergence of numerous community development initiatives, North Lawndale is plagued by high rates of poverty, crime, and joblessness. As of 2004, the median family income in North Lawndale was only $20,253less than half the city of Chicago's average'and 51.5% of North Lawndale families with children were living below the poverty line.(2) In 2005, 42% of North Lawndale households reported a total income under $15,000.(3) North Lawndale's unemployment rate is 13%, in comparison with Chicago's 5% average.(4) The prevalence of criminal records among North Lawndale citizens poses additional obstacles to their finding employment and to the community's economic vitality. According to a report by the Center for Impact Research, in 2001 almost 60% of North Lawndale's adult population was incarcerated, on probation, on parole, or sentenced to prison.(5) Technological literacy can benefit Chicago's North Lawndale residents, filling in the educational gaps, enhancing residents' access to employment opportunities, enabling them to research critical financial, legal, and health information, and providing them with a forum for their concerns and a means to advocate for change. Numerous studies have shown that digital inclusion remains a problem in low-income, predominately African-American communities like North Lawndale. Greater familiarity with and access to technology at public computing centers has the potential to improve the economic circumstances of North Lawndale's families and individuals, and ultimately revive the community. Moreover, access to technical resources can improve the types of jobs that residents of this community can retain. A major goal of the Lawndale Community Wireless Network is to make this community attractive to emerging industries such as call centers, remote service centers and other businesses that require a workforce with basic and advanced computer literacy skills and a reliable broadband infrastructure. As part of the initiative, the collaborative is also exploring the development of a local, LEED certified facility that would house new businesses and incubate others for the benefit of community economic development and increased employment opportunities for local residents. The proposed facility would be situated in close proximity to the proposed training centers creating a major corridor for digital innovation and inclusion for the North Lawndale community. NLEN and the collaborative are also working closely with Wright College, a member of Chicago's city college system, to offer continuing education courses 'both certified and non-certified within participating network training centers. Finally, each of the proposed training centers will leverage their existing expertise and achievement in job search and retention to place the program's participants. A majority of the centers
are current or former recipients of digital divide grants allocated by the State of Illinois to encourage
digital access, literacy and employment outcomes. Leveraging the skills and reach of the existing
network of centers against the community broadband project will create the optimal conditions for
engaging local citizens, and creating long-standing impact that will offer greater benefit to the
community. Footnotes: (1) Chicago Area Project, 2007; (2) Catalyst Chicago, March 2004; (3) LISC
Chicago's New Communities, 2007; (4) Steans Family Foundation; (5) North Lawndale Employment
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