Executive Summary

Need for improving broadband service adoption rates

The proposed project specifically addresses a major problem that presses upon Bessemer just as it does upon other rural communities, namely the need to attract industry and young people as its population ages and younger people move to more urbanized parts of the state for economic opportunities. The unemployment rate of 13.7% is higher than the national average and forecasted to rise further given the current business climate. To attract today’s businesses and retain jobs, we need reliable Internet. Robust high-speed connections would allow more of our residents to telecommute and stay in the community, would afford them better opportunities to learn, and would allow their businesses to operate more efficiently. By providing online learning opportunities at partner anchor institutions, this project will increase broadband subscription demand as well as improve long-term economic development by providing online learning opportunities to area citizens through the anchor institutions they trust for quality personal growth opportunities: libraries, K-12 schools, colleges, workforce training centers, and workplaces – including hospitals, police departments, and top businesses. All Bessemer citizens can benefit from the kind of “just in time” inexpensive training that will enable workers to enter career fields for which there is growing demand, particularly in the areas of health care and IT, which are at the center of the training offerings we are proposing to provide. As one resident told the Governor of Alabama, this community does not want to be “limping down the information highway”.

Overall approach

To maximize the use of this kind of investment, we need to maximize the ability of our residents to benefit from it. Although Bessemer students are doing better than the state average, we are mindful that Alabama student graduation rates as a whole are among the lowest in the nation. By helping to bridge the educational and skills gap, we will make the entire broadband investment more effective and sustainable. Our innovative approaches are evident in three main ways. First, we will be using our broadband connectivity in anchor institutions to provide the customized skills training for jobs that are in demand in the local area and for future-oriented “green energy” jobs that will be a key growth industry in this area. We will not overlook, however, the needs of a significant proportion of the
population we are serving, who may not have graduated high school or who graduated without needed skills. We will encourage everyone in Bessemer to use our online courses to earn at least a GED and an Internet Core Competency Certificate (IC3), building a strong reputation for Bessemer’s workforce. Secondly, we will be setting up teams of businesses, educators, health care and emergency service workers, and other stakeholders to inform people about the use and value of the courses. These teams will set up groups of volunteers who will support workers in key job skill areas, using our tele-mentoring platform if necessary. This community effort will be led by paid project staff in conjunction with staff of our partner anchor institutions. The third innovative element is an electronic database (job bank) that will be available to local employers. It will document key information about our students, if they wish to be included, such as the courses they took, the hours spent, the tests passed and the certifications achieved (validated from our state of the art Learning Management System). This will provide all parties a clear incentive to fully participate in the system and to find simple mechanisms to recognize and reward effort and results. We plan to celebrate achievements through public ceremonies where awards will be issued and media invited.

Target population

Our target population consists of workers between the ages of 16 and 64 who are either unemployed or under-employed. Nearly 70% of the population of the Bessemer Cut-Off area is African American, so our staff will create and adjust programming that will ensure cultural inclusion and a reflection of local demographics. By partnering with anchor institutions, we aim to reach the 25% of our population living below the Federal poverty line, providing online learning to people who may not yet have Internet access at home and increasing their demand for broadband. K-12 students will have the opportunity to experience technology and customized online learning, helping them learn the academic and technological skills they will need to complete school and compete in the 21st century job market.

Applicant qualifications

CyberLearning’s training has helped not only individuals, but also entire national economies, to use education to become more competitive. For example, Mauritius uses these courses in efforts to diversify its economy so it can become less dependent on sugar and tourism and can compete in higher wage industries. Chair of CyberLearning Dr. Kuttan was able to convince the Mauritius government in 2007 to adopt IC3 as their way of measuring digital literacy for the island and to require all college applicants to pass IC3. This policy sent the clear message that the nation is serious about developing a new future. This was not the first major achievement of Dr. Kuttan’s career – his other projects around the world have involved transformational thinking, bold leadership and expert “management by systems”. This project will harness the same skill mix. The CyberLearning team has strong experience in bringing stakeholders together, organizing a vision and implementing a “management by objectives” plan.
Jobs to be saved or created

We will be creating 13 staff positions and we are anticipating 43 jobs that will be saved or created in the two years based on the projections of health care growth in Bessemer and the need to ensure that Bessemer residents are first in line for new green energy jobs that are expected to grow exponentially in the coming years. NEF courses are designed to prepare citizens to be more competitive when applying for existing and new job markets. For example, Project Management, IC3, and Microsoft Office certification courses make workers in a range of industries (any field that uses basic computer skills or runs projects) more qualified. In turn, these workers then make the companies they work for more efficient and able to save and create jobs.

Overall Cost

Between direct and indirect charges, the grant would pay for $1,893,578 of the Total Eligible Project Costs. This would be matched by the $1,895,250 donation from NEF. Total Project Costs: $3,788,828
Total Cost per trainee: $947 Federal cost per trainee: $1,893,578 ÷ 4,000 trainees = $473