Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: University of Alaska Statewide Office of Information Technology

Project Title: Bridging the e-Skills Gap in Alaska

Project Type: Sustainable Adoption

_____**Executive Summary**_____

Many industry experts agree that when it comes to broadband access and subsequent adoption, Alaska residents are possibly the most unserved and underserved population in the U.S. Alaska's rural areas are for the most part limited to satellite connectivity. There are only a few areas in rural Alaska with any terrestrial microwave distribution systems that deploy broadband services across limited areas. The Regulatory Commission of Alaska Broadband Inventory (Jan. 2007) showed 47/341 small, rural communities with no broadband or even local dialup service. The vast majority of the 294 communities with Internet availability receive a signal at or below 256 kbps. Statistics compiled by Leichtman Research Group (2007) indicated a 9.2% digital broadband service penetration in Alaska – the lowest of all 50 states.

Paradoxically, given the conditions just described, many public-serving agencies and institutions in Alaska have content already prepared for broadband delivery, but not the internal capacity to promote its use. Consumers and end-users are unaware of the content and/or have limited information literacy skills. Not all content is intuitive or friendly to end users, particularly new users. In addition, many agencies have spent valuable resources creating content that is duplicative of existing materials. There are few opportunities in rural Alaska for non-traditional audiences (i.e. those not in school or with a job requiring technology use) to "try out" personal computing equipment or become acquainted with broadband resources. Further, most communities do not have individuals trained to meet local information technology needs; if a new user becomes frustrated with the experience there is no one to turn to locally for help.

This project to Bridge the e-Skills Gap in Alaska is an ambitious and innovative proposal by a powerful multi-sector group of partners from education, health care, early childhood, social services, government, and public safety to create a strategic coordinated framework for promoting technology literacy and training. The project activities will lead to sustainable adoption of publicly available broadband content by a wide spectrum of end-users across Alaska and increased use of technology best practices by the project partners.

The Bridging the e-Skills Gap in Alaska project has 4 primary goals, consistent with the BTOP statutory purpose:

• To create a cadre of local rural residents with information technology software and hardware skills of immediate use to new broadband users in the community, and with employability value to training participants.

• To encourage technology use among underserved audiences across Alaska with a broadband awareness program using print, radio and electronic media that includes a wide spectrum of topics to encourage broadband use, and through an innovative computer device loan program.

• To offer broadband technology audits (similar to energy audits), based on best practices in design, to project partners along with resources and assistance for any partner-desired revisions to garner increased use by target audiences.

• To create a statewide Multi-Sector Digital Inclusion Council, operating under the Alaska Distance Education Consortium (AkDEC) as a forum for the discussion and sharing of best practices and the elimination of redundancy through sharing of partner-developed content.

This project has an ambitious scope. The 21 partner institutions, agencies, and businesses expect the project to reach across Alaska, generating up to 88,000 new users in the next 3 years and providing an average of 4 hours of training to over 84,000 Alaskans, including school-age children, professional adults, unemployed adults, and senior citizens. Potential new users were counted carefully to avoid duplicate counts, i.e. new professional users specifically include health aides and nurses, teachers, and school administrators. New adult users in the total count include the unemployed and senior citizens.

This project includes innovative strategies for reaching Alaska's diverse and disbursed residents. Video conferencing technology, live electronic discussions, and web archiving of content for asynchronous retrieval will all be used. Much of the training is local job capacity building – Village IT support, TeleHealth coordinators, continuing education for educators and other professionals, and work skill readiness as a tool for addressing unemployment and poverty. 32% of the project budget represents training costs with an average per person cost for broadband awareness or broadband-assisted training of just $51. This is a phenomenal demonstration of the value of broadband for precipitating change in Alaska: Currently, most training occurs in a hub community and regularly tops $1,000 per person for travel alone. The project partners themselves intend to use broadband technology for project management.

The budget includes resources for an innovative and sensible approach to introducing end-users to broadband technology for personal use, by purchasing relatively inexpensive mobile devices that can be loaned to users. The total cost of the mobile broadband equipment is $601,889, a per unit cost of $946.

The costs to achieve the objectives of this proposal are very reasonable given its statewide scope. The project partners are providing a 52% match, $2,293,374. The cash match is $180,000 with the rest of the match as in-kind contributions directly attributable to this project. Notably, 34% of the match was contributed by the media partner for radio and TV time as well as print advertisement purchase for the awareness campaign.

AkDEC is the ideal sponsor for this statewide initiative. Housed at the University of Alaska, AkDEC has a 10 year history of coordinating statewide technology initiatives and services.