

# **BTOP Project Title, Description and Executive Summary**

**Project Title:** Maine Public Library Information Commons Project

**Project Description:** The Maine Public Library Information Commons Project establishes or enhances public computer centers in 107 public libraries in Maine. The centers will provide broadband access, information and training to vulnerable populations. This project also establishes 11 additional video conferencing regional hubs to enhance training for librarians and patrons.

## **Executive Summary of the proposed project:**

Maine is a large state geographically, with many small, isolated communities. It is the second most rural state in the nation with 59.9% of the population living in rural areas. For nearly a generation, jobs have been leaving Maine. The shoe factories are gone; the last sardine cannery in the United States will close in April; lumbering jobs are moving out of the country; paper mills have closed, and fishing is becoming more and more restricted. Eight of Maine's sixteen counties have unemployment rates above the national average. New technology promises that Maine does not need to be the —end of the line. An increasing number of services and employment opportunities are available online, but many Maine residents lack available and/or affordable high-speed Internet access and the assistance to begin using it. The ability to access public computers in libraries is critical in Maine's current environment.

Research by the American Library Association shows that public libraries are the sole source of no-fee access to the Internet for 73% of Americans who have no connectivity at home or work. In 2008 there were only 1,424 public access computers available in public libraries located throughout Maine. Many of those computers in the smaller libraries are from a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Grant awarded in 2002, some were replaced by a Gates grant in 2008-09. Seventy-five percent of the public libraries responding to a survey in 2010 reported not having enough public access computers to meet current demand. Many also reported that many of the existing public computers were too old to run current software. Over 220 public libraries connect to the Internet in Maine through the Maine School and Library Network. Beginning in July 2010 all these libraries will have at minimum a 10 mbps broadband connection. On the information side, libraries are already working on three projects to provide more assistance to in their communities: 1) a new library partnership with the state's Department of Labor will help those unemployed or underemployed use new technologies to find needed employment, 2) the Maine State Library is participating with other state libraries nationwide in Project Compass, an Institute of Museum and Library Services funded project, whose goal is to maximize the effectiveness of local libraries in providing activities, services, and outreach to unemployed residents; and 3) libraries are working with the court system in Maine in an —Access to Justice program that will bring legal information and forms on-line to Maine citizens through the local public library.

This application seeks funding to equip Maine's public libraries to become —information commons areas-- to serve as access points to free high speed Internet service and to provide assistance to vulnerable populations both in the use of technology and in finding and using needed information in the areas of employment, civil law, health, government services, small business information, and workforce development.

Public libraries have historically provided a gateway to information. They are perceived as safe places to go for unbiased, friendly, confidential information. As broadband is introduced into rural communities the public library is a logical place to learn to use the new medium -- seeing how social networking works, finding new information sources— applying for jobs on-line and —trying it out before making an investment for home or business. Bringing together access to technology and access to needed information makes sense. That is the aim of the Maine Public Library Information Commons Project. Because of the increased use of technology as a means of accessing information and the recent shift towards cooperative learning and group study, academic libraries have been experimenting with new ways to combine information resources, technology, and research assistance. An "information commons" provides computers, information resources in various formats, and staff assistance in one central location. In an academic setting, that may mean having IT staff, writing coaches, subject specialists and reference librarians located in the same room.

The Maine Public Libraries Information Commons Project seeks to use these findings in public library settings. This project will provide library staff and volunteers with the tools to give assistance to the vulnerable populations in all areas our targeted groups may need: e.g. use of the technology and its latest applications such as social networking, photo editing, and SKYPE; and knowledge to find resources on employment issues, legal issues and other information needed in their daily lives.

The Maine Public Library Information Commons Project will increase the number of computers and workstations available to the public by over 40% in 107 public libraries across the state thus increasing the public's access to broadband connectivity. These 107 local public library computer centers will serve 683,647 (52%) potential users in Maine. The Maine State Library will establish 11 regional hubs in 11 counties with IP-based video conferencing capability. The video conferencing hubs will serve over 1,030,714 Maine citizens in their counties. This project will also provide local librarians with needed training in both technology skills and information skills needed to assist others in their communities. This technology is needed in Maine where geography and distance are a constant challenge. A statewide video conferencing system serving the public schools is being installed in stages with infrastructure at Networkmaine, a unit of the University of Maine in Orono. We propose to leverage the investment in this system, and equip and connect our public computer centers with this technology allowing the conferencing system to serve more than the school population. The total potential number of users at the video conferencing hubs and public library computer centers is 24,243 per week or 1,260,636 yearly. This project will also establish three mobile laptop labs housed in libraries in north, south and central Maine. These laptops will be used to bring hands-on training to more remote locations for librarians and patrons.

The Maine State Library is requesting \$1,362,459.00 in funding through the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program, to increase computer capacity at public libraries giving all residents in the state increased access to broadband. The total cost of this project over two years will be \$1,951,640.00. Maine's match for this grant will include: 1) \$357,936.00 from the Maine Telecommunications Education Access Fund that supports telecommunications in Maine schools and libraries, 2) \$52,000 in match from libraries to partially fund computers from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and 3) a match in time and salary from the Maine State Library, Maine InfoNet, and the Maine School and Library Network Circuit Rider totaling \$179,245

Oversight of this Maine State Library project will be through Maine InfoNet, a collaborative of libraries and cultural heritage organizations that have agreed to share collections and information technology. The organization evolved over many years until a formalized partnership was formed in 2006 between the University of Maine System Libraries and the Maine State Library to share staff, funding and infrastructure to develop and support a digital library for the state. Maine InfoNet develops and manages consortia and statewide library services. The project team is comprised of seven professionals who share a history in building Maine's telecommunications infrastructure to support libraries, and serving the broader goals of the state to use communications technology to raise the quality of life for rural Maine residents as well as support productivity and profitability for Maine's businesses.

This project addresses the BTOP goals of 1) providing improved access to broadband service to consumers residing in underserved areas of the country, and 2) providing broadband access, education, awareness, training, equipment, and support to community anchor institutions or organizations and agencies serving vulnerable populations.