

University of Minnesota, community receive \$2.9 million grant to help close digital divide in Twin Cities

Written by

Friday, 18 December 2009 13:56

The University of Minnesota, in partnership with 12 community organizations, has received \$2,862,333 in federal funds to develop and improve 11 computer labs throughout underserved neighborhoods in the Twin Cities as part of the federal stimulus law. The award was selected from among 2,200 proposals received by the Department of Commerce. The grant was the only one given to a university and the largest grant given in its category.

The university will work with its partners to improve 10 existing public computer labs and establish a new computer lab at a public housing site, Glendale Homes in Minneapolis. This will add 93 new workstations and replace 49 existing stations and is based upon a model developed by the Office for Business and Community Economic Development (BCED).

The grant also will allow the labs to hire local residents as training and support staff and will provide software programs and culturally sensitive curriculum relevant to education, health and economic development. The project will be implemented by the Office for Business and Community Economic Development and the Urban Research and Outreach/Engagement Center (UROC), established in 2007. University of Minnesota Extension also will be involved.

“We are deeply gratified that our application was approved, considering the strong competition throughout the country to make use of these essential funds,” said Senior Vice President for System Academic Administration Robert Jones, who led the effort to establish UROC. “We have been told our proposal was one of the most highly regarded by the reviewers due to its targeted nature and its genuine involvement of community partners. This work is of the highest strategic priority for us as we work in partnership to solve community-identified issues that affect urban residents.”

“This is a powerful partnership -- leveraging the strengths of the community and the university to work for a common goal right where the people are,” said Barbara Milan, director of the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center.

The partners project that almost 400 nonprofits and women- and minority-owned businesses serving vulnerable populations in the metro area will benefit from the computer labs. The project also will provide Internet computer training over the life of the project for 17,000 individuals who rely on public, community-based computer centers.

The partners estimate the project will create 36 new jobs and save 12 existing jobs. The community partners involved in the development stage of the project include the Minnesota Multicultural Media Consortium (MMMC), the City of Minneapolis, Minneapolis Housing Authority and Hennepin County. Existing community computer centers provided important data to complete the proposal.

Existing lab sites are located in north and south Minneapolis and the Frogtown area of St. Paul. These labs will be standardized and upgraded, and training provided using materials designed in a culturally, linguistically and technologically appropriate manner.

Broadband Apprenticeship Teams, designed to create both new jobs and training, will support each computer lab, provide training for the users, and upgrade the skill set of existing computer

University of Minnesota, community receive \$2.9 million grant to help close digital divide in Twin Cities

Written by

Friday, 18 December 2009 13:56

center staff. A public awareness and advertising campaign by MMMC, which is a group of newspapers, radio stations and online media serving primarily Twin Cities ethnic communities, will draw users to the sites.

Populations with no or restricted access to broadband and the Internet are concentrated in the urban cores of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Although these areas are fully served by multiple high-speed broadband providers, the reality is that few residents have access to broadband and the majority of the community remains underserved in 2009. These neighborhoods are largely populated by low-income African Americans, Hmong, Latino, Somali immigrants, public housing residents and seniors.

Project partners are: Asian Community Technology Center, Centro, Church of St. Phillip/Nellie Stone Johnson School, Glendale Townhomes-Minneapolis Public Housing, Hmong American Partnership, Lifetrack Resources, MMMC, Patchwork Quilt at Kwanzaa Freedom School, Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, Project for Pride in Living in its new Northside location, Sabathani Community Center and the YWCA's Youth Achiever Program in Frogtown, St. Paul.