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Final Copy of Case Study

Year:
2013

Status:
Laureate

Organization Name:
City of Boston

Organization URL:
www.cityofboston.gov

Project Name:
Boston Public Computing Centers/ Boston Sustainable Broadband Adoption

Category:
Economic Development

Please provide an overview of the nominated project. Describe the problem it was intended to solve, the technology or approach used, how it was innovative and any technical or other challenges that had to be overcome for successful implementation and adoption. (In 300 words or less.)

The City of Boston (COB) has employed two ARRA grants to focus on digital divide issues in the city. The grants, funded by NTIA's Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP), have enabled the development of public computing centers and provided digital skills training to targeted, underserved populations. Working through three COB organizations – Boston Centers for Youth & Families (BCYF), Boston Housing Authority (BHA), and Boston Public Libraries (BPL) – the City is operating 53 public computing centers (PCC). The PCCs are rooted in neighborhoods and staffed by persons possessing an understanding of local populations. Under the Sustainable Broadband Adoption (SBA) grant, two nonprofits – Tech Goes Home (TGH) and Timothy Smith

Network (TSN) – and one for-profit, Connected Living (CL), have focused on delivering targeted training to specific populations: low-income families with children, unemployed individuals lacking digital skills, and seniors living in BHA sites, respectively. Boston's approach to managing these grants has been to encourage collaboration across all aspects of programming and activities. Examples of this team work include: 1) Encouraging the sharing of curriculum, software tools, and classes/programs across all participating organizations. 2) Expanding the reach of individual organizations. For example, Tech Goes Home, which initially focused primarily on providing digital literacy training to BPS students and their families, is now offering classes to individuals through PCCs at BHA, BPL, BCYF, and TSN sites. 3) Using COB's Program Management Office (PMO) to manage the two grants as a program comprised of two closely related projects. This has brought project management skills and helped to build effective, cross-organizational working teams. This collaborative approach has established working relationships between COB departments that have operated as silos in the past. Integrating organizations, programs, and skills is resulting in an impact that is much greater than the sum of the separate parts.

When was this project implemented or last updated? (Please specify month and year.) Has it incorporated new technologies and/or other innovations since its initial deployment? (In 300 words or less.)

COB's Public Computing Center grant was awarded to the city on 12/1/2009 and will end on 9/30/2013. The first year and a quarter primarily involved putting infrastructure in place to support 53 public computing centers located in 10 BHA sites, 16 BCYF community centers, and 27 BPL locations. In all, a total of 628 public workstations (PCs and MacBooks) were installed with a wide array of software that included Microsoft Office, Adobe Creative Suite, Mavis Beacon Typing Tutor, Family Maker software, Study Island, Skills Tutor, and Live Mocha. Once the infrastructure core was in place, emphasis shifted to promoting and recruiting in local communities; developing and teaching classes; sharing curriculum; and cross-training in software packages. Training has been offered across all PCCs in broad areas of interest such as basic Internet and computer use, office skills, job search skills, adult education, and multimedia. There has also been a wide variety of specialized training tailored to the interests of user populations by topic and language. The second grant, Sustainable Broadband Adoption, was awarded to COB on 9/13/2010 and will end on 8/31/2013. Two of the three subrecipients have completed their contracted training and the third will continue until August 2013.

Is implementation of the project complete? If no, please describe the project's phases and which phase the project is now in. (In 300 words or less.)

Implementation of the project is complete in that everything is in place. The project, at the same time, continues to grow and develop. The collaborative activities of the PCCs and the SBA subrecipients nurture a continuous expansion of community resources and opportunities. An example: BPL purchased Live Mocha – an online community for learning languages – for the entire city. Recently BPL staff provided a train-the-trainer session for BCYF staff. BCYF is now starting to introduce Live Mocha in their centers. Both grants are in their final stages. Team members as well as executive management of BCYF, BHA, and BPL are now addressing questions of sustainability. Clearly PCCs along with the more targeted and extensive training delivered by COB's SBA partners have contributed a valuable service in providing access and training to underserved Bostonians. Dialogue is focused on how to keep this neighborhood-based network in place. The vision that is emerging from these discussions is to see a role for the PCCs as neighborhood resources that can help to support City-based initiatives. Examples of the role they could play include: 1) Continuing to provide access and skills training to citizens who lack these resources. Providing access, training, and support helps in the development and growth of a digital workforce. The connection between this and COB's continuing effort to attract new businesses to Boston is strong. 2) Providing support for new digital resources that City departments are rolling out to constituents. An example: Boston Public Schools is launching a Parent Portal to provide two-way communications between families and schools as part of a new student information system. The success of this new communication channel is too important to not address issues of the gap between "the haves and the have nots."

Please provide at least one example of how the technology project has benefited a specific individual or organization. Feel free to include personal quotes from individuals who have directly benefited from the work. (In 300 words or less.)

Both BTOP grants have touched/changed thousands of lives. Below are examples of how these projects have benefited individuals: 1) BPL participant: "I'm so happy – now I can attach photographs and send them to my family in Brazil. Now I have an email account! I'm really looking forward to coming back to learn about Skype." 2) Connected Living participant [target audience – seniors and disabled living in BHA sites]: "I think it gives tenants here a way out of this building and into the universe by their having access to the Internet and knowing how to use it. There are things that they'll find out on the Internet to share ideas, conversations, to find out that they have things in common that they may not have discovered without the use of the computer." 3) Online Learning Readiness

participant [target audience – unemployed individuals lacking digital skills]: "Today as it is, most places you can't go in and fill in an application form. Everything is computerized so I needed to get some information and this is definitely the right track for me." 4) Tech Goes Home @ Schools, BPS student [target audience – student/ parent pair]: "Actually it's a great opportunity to learn about your parent or whoever you're working with. I've learned way more about my mom and it's amazing how this one program helped me and my mom communicate easier." 5) Tech Goes Home in Community, BHA resident: "What I learned about this class was how to be independent because before coming to TGH I didn't know anything about computers. I just want to say I've learned a lot not just from the computer, but also from the teacher too."

Would this project be considered an innovation, a best practice or other notable advancement that could be adopted by or tailored for other organizations and uses? If yes, please describe that here. (In 300 words or less.)

This project can be considered a best practice. It most certainly can be tailored for other organizations and uses. In this case, managing the two grants as a program rather than two standalone projects greatly enhanced the collaboration and delivered resulting benefits. Besides the programmatic examples cited in question #5 and #8, we also held combined PCC/SBA meetings. Additionally, we had an "open door" policy so that anyone working on one grant was welcome to attend a meeting of the other. Finally, we made sure to hold periodic social events for all – important for building cohesive teams. A quote from the Executive Director of Tech Goes Home speaks to the benefits: "It has been so interesting to work with so many different groups of people – from the libraries to the school system to the centers for youth and families to the Timothy Smith Network. All of these folks have been, from the beginning, around the table. Now when I'm running Tech Goes Home programs in the schools or in the libraries, I know somebody to call. That level of collaboration is something I have never seen happen within a city government. Boston is unique in that we all have a stake in this and we all have an interest in supporting one another."

If there are any other details that the judges should know about this project, please note them here. (In 300 words or less.)

A major learning has been that to be a world-class, digital city requires more than building and supplying digital tools for interacting with citizens. There is also a need to make sure that all citizens have access and skills to participate in this emerging, networked environment.