

TEXAS RURAL BEST ANNUAL AWARD APPLICATION

Section I

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Section II:

- a. Purpose of Organization:

The Dr. Eugene Clark Library is Texas' oldest continuously operating library and serves the rural central Texas community of Lockhart, several surrounding small isolated communities and the Lockhart Independent School District. Lockhart's population is estimated to be 13,000. It is the larger of only two public libraries in the county, and is solely supported by the city of Lockhart.

While loved by the community as the focal point for the "cultural conscious" of the community and a beloved historic landmark, the library functions as an active and vital educational and recreational center for the community. Providing books, materials, programming and cultural enrichment for our community, the library serves as the "university of the people" for the citizens of Lockhart and Caldwell County. Well-informed citizens are an economic boost to any city and for many citizens in our area the library is their only source for continuing education and information. The library is the only place in the community where its citizens can use a computer for preparing a résumé, or the Internet to search the Governor's Job Bank, or a typewriter to complete a job application, or get study guides to improve their test scores --- all at not cost! For many young people, the library serves as their first exposure to books, reading, art and technology.

Section III:

- a. Description of innovative project:

LOCK.NET (Lockhart Neighborhood Electronic Training) is a library outreach program that provides computers, printers, one-on-one training and Internet connectivity in two disadvantaged neighborhoods in Lockhart. Computer and Internet training is provided in both Spanish and English at four local neighborhood churches and the Head Start facility and is absolutely free to any resident. Library staff travels with six laptops, printer, scanner and digital camera to five neighborhood sites and offers seven weekly computer-training sessions of four hours each to the community. Residents may browse the Internet, email friends, print flyers or

just practice their computer skills. Several times during the year in-depth training is given on MS Word, PowerPoint, Excel or other software applications. Participates are encouraged to spend as much time as they want at the computer and are encouraged to use and learn the applications they want and need. Since its inception in November of 1999 the program has had an average attendance of 160 people per month. Of these students 26% are African American, 37% Hispanic, 37% Angelo and 35% of the students are over 65 years old.

b. Description of significant problems solved by innovative solutions:

According to a report published by the National Telecom and Information Administration, Americans living in rural areas with the lowest income levels are among the least likely to have access to the Internet. Rural households earning less than \$5,000 per year have the lowest PC-ownership rates at 7.9% and this income group has an on-line access rate of 2.3%, compared to an overall US electronic access rate of 36.6%.

“The ability to use computers and to manage digital information is becoming increasingly important for people to succeed in their education and careers. And, yet fewer than 3% of the families in the lowest quarter of income have Internet access at home, and that gap continues to widen.” This quote, taken from the Gates Foundation mission statement, addresses the very heart of our project and supports and builds on the national initiative to bridge the “digital divide.”

LOCK.NET project personnel move all the equipment and provide training in municipal electoral Districts 1 and 2 of Lockhart. These targeted areas are divided socio-economically, culturally and geographically from the downtown area of the City.

District 1, referred to by long time residents as “Cockleburrr” or “Muddy Acres” is located to the east of Highway 183 which is the main thoroughfare bisecting the town. District 2, referred to as “Tank Town” is located north of the downtown area and is separated by the railroad tracks which run east and west through Lockhart.

These targeted areas are predominately populated by Hispanics and African Americans and many of the residents are elderly. Voter turnout in these districts is traditionally low and many of these citizens do not participate in the governmental process nor do they take advantage of many city services including library service. For the most part these residents are poor, speak little or no English and feel disenfranchised from the city.

In a door-to-door survey in these neighborhoods conducted by Head Start, 55 households were sampled. Of the sample group, 26 heads of households were unemployed. It was further determined that 33 heads of

households had no high school diploma. According to the 1990 census tracks for these areas the median household income ranges from \$8,009 to \$ 14,815. The state median income is \$23,707. Caldwell County, with a median income of \$16,262, ranks 201st in the state in personal income. The City Council and the Comprehensive Planning Committee have designated both of the targeted districts as areas for re-investment by the city.

While the program has targeted these two areas of the city, many other residents of the city have benefited as well. Any citizen may come to any session offered by LOCK.NET at any site and many residents, not from the targeted neighborhoods, have taken advantage of the training as well. Recently a few small businesses have even sent some of their employees to the classes to take advantage of this fantastic training!

The City Council, city staff and the community have been extraordinarily supportive of this project. Councilmen from both districts have personally promoted the program to their voters and to their fellow Council members. Public Works department provided manpower to assist the library in setting up the remote sites and technical assistance in wiring the buildings for Internet connections. The city provides space on the city cable channel to promote the program and the local newspaper prints many public services announcements, both in Spanish and English and provides space for a regular feature story highlighting participants of the training program.

In addition to city support, the bonds forged by the LOCK.NET program with the community have been strengthened by its success and these partnerships have benefited the library, the city government and the citizens of Lockhart.

c. Length of time innovation has been operational:

This project began in September of 1999 and was financed totally with funds provided by Texas State Library and Archives Commission LSTA Special Projects Grant. The total cost of the program for year one was \$39,000, which included a project manager's salary and all equipment and supplies. Second year funding for \$56,077 was approved and began in September of 2000. In Year Two the program added a part-time assistant to provide additional hours of training and added two laptops. LOCK.NET received year three funding in August 2001 of \$39,477 with the city budget picking up \$15,000 of its operation for the cost of part-time personnel, supplies and publicity.

d. Evidence that the project is unique:

While many libraries and literacy centers are offering computer training at established centers, our project is unique in that we travel into the communities where they live and work. The project has touched a great many Lockhart citizens that have never had any direct contact with city staff members, other than perhaps paying their utility bills. The program has provided training to a segment of our population that most needs job skills and improved life styles, yet are least likely to take advantage of more traditional training opportunities offered in the city. In the beginning we encountered resistance to our presence, and a natural resentment toward anything that smacks of government bureaucracy. However, with time and exposure to library personnel we have made great strides in promoting the city as an entity that shares in the desire to make Lockhart a better place to live, work and play—a partner with its citizens.

In our increasingly technology driven world, those without at least *basic* computer skills are hard pressed to get anything but the most menial and low paying jobs. This drastically reduces their chances to move into the mainstream of society and will affect their family's opportunities for generations.

Nationwide, Texas is one of the leading states in the technology field and Central Texas with its "Silicon Gulch" is leading the state of Texas in technology. Technical skills are a necessity in the job market in Central Texas. All the more reason the residents living here need to be trained and educated to meet the demands of the workplace. As Phil McBride, Assistant Superintendent says, "It's sad but true, that while Lockhart and Caldwell County are within thirty miles of Austin, the 'high tech Mecca' of Texas, we are finding that many of the benefits of the high tech industry are not reaching our community. Innovative programs like LOCK.NET, bridge the invisible barrier that seems to separate us from the technology whirlwind that has so rapidly changed our regional economy and job market."

In August of 2000 the city of Lockhart and the Lockhart Independent School District in conjunction with 9 community partners received a Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund Community Network grant for \$500,000. Lockhart was an excellent candidate for this grant since it augmented and expanded the services offered by LOCK.NET but also allowed us a seamless integration of public access and training throughout the community. LOCK.NET has enabled us to prepare the community for an enormous leap in technological opportunities for training, job skills, personal growth, information, research and pleasure.

To summarize, we believe LOCK.NET's success has been extraordinary. With the utilization of all available local resources LOCK.NET has truly met a community need that was not being addressed through traditional means. The program brings a service directly into their communities at no cost to them and teaches

them skills that will benefit them in the current and future job market. Many have gained new skills in a fun and non-intimidating environment. The people in the targeted area are more aware of and use the services offered by the library and the city. The program is unique and is successful because the training and access is provided in neighborhoods where the residents feel comfortable and the training is provided in a non-intimidating environment. The one-on-one training has been a non-threatening way for people to learn new skills without feeling “stupid.”

In addition, the program has given the city a sense of partnership in improving the lives of all its citizens and the program has been honored with a prestigious Texas Municipal League Excellence Award for cities under 25,000 population and was also awarded the Texas Library Association’s Highsmith Award for excellence in outreach and collaborative programming.

The intangible and immeasurable outcomes of the project are perhaps the most compelling. Many residents now view the city and the library as allies--- not the enemy in their struggle to improve their lives and the lives of their children. Many of the personal success stories of LOCK.NET participants are heart-rending and touching.

Section IV

- a. Evidence that the project may be duplicated in other rural areas of the state:

Funding for technology training and infrastructure is at an all time high in Texas. Many grant opportunities exist for small rural communities to bring technology to their communities. Texas State Library and Archives Commission provides funding, as does the Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund Board and many private corporations and foundations are presently providing technology funding.

Deploying a minimum amount of portable equipment, i.e. two laptops and a printer, and dedicated personnel, any community can reach out to its citizens and provide much needed training in basic computer skills in a friendly and non-threatening environment.