

**TOP FY 2000
Project Narrative**

Connecticut Association for United Spanish Action, Inc.

**Grant # 09-60-00023
Meriden, CT**

1. PROJECT PURPOSE

1.A. Specific Need. Project Nexo will reduce technology, educational and employment-related disparities among the Hispanic population in Connecticut. The facts below demonstrate directly these disparities and the challenges facing the Hispanic population in Connecticut:

- § 40% of Hispanic households live at or below the poverty level (nearly seven times the statewide average).
- § 34.5% of the State's welfare caseload is Hispanic while Hispanics comprise 9% of the State's population.¹
- § The Hispanic population experienced a 10.8% growth rate between 1980 and 1990 while the overall population growth rate in Connecticut was less 1%.²
- § 53% of Hispanics graduated from high school (v. 73% statewide) and only 15% have attended some college.³ 86% of the Hispanic population expressed concern about the poor education of its youth.⁴
- § The gap between white and Hispanic households regarding Internet access increased 37.6% between 1997 and 1998 (from 12.5% to 17.2%). Hispanic households are roughly half as likely to own a computer as White households and nearly 2.5 times less likely to use the Internet.⁵
- § Connecticut ranks 42nd in the U.S. for percentage of classrooms wired for the Internet and with teachers trained in technology.⁶

Research demonstrates the existence of strong correlation between the high unemployment and poverty rates and the low rate of educational attainment and access to computers and the Internet. Education is key to a person's lifetime economic prospects as well as to making the most of one's talent and interests in a world that is rapidly changing.⁷ Information tools (e.g., personal computer, Internet) are increasingly critical to economic success and personal advancement.⁸ Yet the community-based agencies positioned to most effectively reach the Hispanic population are not equipped with the technological resources necessary to cause a major impact. At the same time, the traditional service providers (e.g., welfare programs, public education) are struggling to engage Hispanic clients.

CAUSA, Inc. is a coalition of 12 Hispanic community-based organizations that provide educational and "lifeline" services to low income and working class Hispanics with a population of over 200,000 in Connecticut. CAUSA organizations represent Connecticut's best chance to access low-income (and undocumented) Hispanics. CAUSA agencies, however, have extremely limited computer capabilities and no existing networks. Only 8 (of 12) have Internet connectivity, all at low-bandwidth. CAUSA agencies work face-to-face with clients providing

¹ Connecticut Department of Social Services, 1998.

² "Funding Needs of Hispanic Community-Based Organizations in Connecticut," H.C. Planning Consultants, 1998.

³ "Building Bridges to Economic Security," Connecticut Voices for Children, 2000.

⁴ "Latino Socio/Economic Study," Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission, 1997.

⁵ "Falling through the Net: The Digital Divide," National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999.

⁶ "New Economy Index," Progressive Policy Institute, 1999.

⁷ "Closing the Education Gap: Benefits and Costs," RAND Organization, 1999.

⁸ "Falling through the Net: The Digital Divide," National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999.

job counseling and educational services, using traditional methods that, while effective, reach limited audiences and are restricted in flexibility. Nor do they prepare consumers with technology-based skill sets that are required to succeed in educational and employment environments.

Project Nexa is a relatively simple concept: We are providing a technological platform for a variety of education and training providers to come together to access a traditionally hard to reach community. The Project builds on services that the CBO's agencies are already providing, and uses proven advanced technologies to bring additional providers and classes to their agencies.

1.B. The Solution that Employs Network Technologies. CAUSA proposes Project Nexa: a comprehensive networking infrastructure to support a lifelong learning and career development initiative. Project Nexa will deliver state-of-the-art, network-based educational programs and access to federal and state education and training resources available. This innovative model uses advanced ADSL network technology to:

- § Develop new on-line distance learning courses in Spanish and English geared to the Hispanic community.
- § Establish five computer access centers as official satellites connected to the One-Stop Career Centers through which all state and federal adult education and job training resources will flow beginning July 1, 2000 with the implementation of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA). These computer access centers will field test new approaches to the use of advanced telecommunications technology in the delivery of educational services and career counseling information. (See partner descriptions in "Community Involvement" section.)

To complement these career-advancing services, CAUSA agencies will partner with Infoline, a program of the United Way of Connecticut that provides a comprehensive telephone referral service for all health and human services within Connecticut. Infoline will offer real-time access to social and human service information via the Internet in both English and Spanish. Furthermore, CAUSA, Inc. staff will use the network technology to share social service and best practice expertise among and across agencies and partners.

1.C. Realistic and Measurable Outcomes. The Project Nexa infrastructure will produce the following outcomes for the Hispanic community:

- (a) Five public access computer centers located at a Hispanic community-based organizations and computer and Internet capacity of all CAUSA agencies.
- (b) Server-based delivery of a full range of Adult Education curriculum (GED, ESL, and basic skills) to 347 students (in partnership with local Adult Education Centers);
- (c) Delivery of basic computer skills training to 1,417 students to support access to the Internet and employment opportunities;
- (d) Enrollment of 50 students in on-line college-level courses developed through Project Nexa or through the 30 members of the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium (15 students will receive an intensive level of counseling and support for their success at Charter Oak State College), and

- (e) Full access to the resources, job listings, workshops, web-casts, and labor market information available through the WIA One-Stops and their many mandated partners, leading to at least 500 participants entering employment.
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2. INNOVATION

2.A. A Competitive Technology Advantage for Hispanic-based Community Agencies.

The strategic application of cutting edge technology across community-based organizations and agencies on line and the development of Hispanic-based products will create a synergy between the end-user and the service providers that heretofore has limited educational and employment attainment among the Hispanic population. Project Nexo will demonstrate the application of affordable, commercially available ASDL network technology (ADLS lines, Ethernet server-based 100Mb networks). It will expand dramatically the access to educational and career opportunities by a linguistically and economically isolated population. Project Nexo will pioneer new uses of technology for both education and workforce development in partnership with numerous institutions. The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 restructures radically the delivery of adult education and workforce development services. Project Nexo network capability will put the CAUSA agencies at the forefront in the implementation of these reforms through direct, network connections to both the state and regional partners charged with developing the WIA One-Stop Career Centers and providers of advanced, network-based educational programming through the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium.

2.B. New Hispanic-centered Educational and Employability Products. CAUSA's competitive service advantage is a deeply committed, bilingual staff who dispel cultural barriers in friendly, established, community-based locations that remove geographic and perceived status barriers. Project Nexo will allow CAUSA to deliver on-line a 'world' of curricular enrichment in all educational offerings and partnerships with Puerto Rican Universities offering on-line college courses in Spanish. Students can continue to gain college credits while they develop their English skills. Project Nexo and partners will develop new on-line Spanish-language programming for GED preparation and for college courses through distance learning. The project will demonstrate affordable technology used in new ways -- videoconferencing, curriculum delivery, web and e-mail integrated into curriculum

No comparable projects on the NTIA web site integrates a strong Hispanic cultural orientation with a deep partnership with so many pillars of the education and workforce development world. Project Nexo employs methods from successful Computer Access Centers focused on learning and jobs and adds three distinctive new dimensions:

- § Project Nexo activities are based in small, local, and Hispanic-run organizations with a strong, culturally-derived collective support structure;
- § University-based content developers and a 28-member distance learning consortium are partnering with CAUSA to support access to and success in higher education (most CAUSA students would not otherwise encounter opportunities at Charter Oak State College)
- § Project Nexo builds on strong cultural roots and community-based networks that bind these agencies to Connecticut's 200,000+ Hispanic residents.

2.C. Changing Methods.⁹ Current Adult Education instruction at CAUSA agencies and many Adult Education Centers is class- and book-based with limited if any exposure to computer technology. Employment preparation work with jobseekers is by phone and discussion. Project Nexo will equip all adult learners with computer skills and make a principal of using the latest, on-line and network-based learning technologies and strategies.

2.D. Engaging Partners and Leveraging Existing Resources for Hispanic Customers. Our experience in forging strong partnerships between real grassroot CBOs and major educational and governmental institutions using the power of networking technologies and effective data and evaluation strategies promises to offer important insights to groups around the country seeking to attack similar community and cultural challenges. Existing approaches to the delivery of educational and career advancement services are not reaching the Hispanic population for three primary reasons: (1) cultural and language barriers, (2) distance and scheduling issues, and (3) financial barriers. Project Nexo overcomes these barriers by channeling statewide resources and services through a culturally friendly environment within the local neighborhood at no cost to the user.

For the first time, Hispanic individuals will have direct, convenient access available in their neighborhoods with on-site assistance from bilingual staff members who are culturally attuned to their needs to employment and educational services provided by the State Department of Labor, Regional Workforce Development Boards, Charter Oak Community College, and Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium. In turn, the project's partners will have direct access to the Hispanic community through these established cultural centers.

3. DIFFUSION POTENTIAL

3.A. Prevalence and Project Accessibility. The isolation from educational and technological resources is not unique to the Hispanic community. African American communities and low-income families suffer from similar exclusion from these resources.¹⁰ Project Nexo will provide an excellent model for community-based agencies that target a specific population who want to establish an affordable network technology that provides a platform to partner with a variety of state agencies and social service providers. The value added is the unification of the resources that exist in some form or another in all communities.

3.B. Ease of Replication. While the proposed technological solution enables Project Nexo's lifetime learning initiative, its true profit is found in the new capacity to support the unprecedented partnerships between the Hispanic CBOs and their partners. Project Nexo demonstrates the applicability of using ADSL technology to support community-based educational services at a fraction of the cost of T-1 or fractional T-1 lines. In addition, the cost of delivery of college and other curriculum is significantly less than it would be in a traditional educational setting.

⁹ Our innovation extends to project management and evaluation—we will use Bar Code reader technology to track usage and achievement by users of the Centers, the first community-based application in Connecticut of techniques tested by our partner, the Connecticut Department of Labor, to track usage of their job center self-service areas.

¹⁰ Falling through the Net: The Digital Divide," National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999.

3.C. Information Dissemination. Each of the partners that we have joined with on Project Nexo have wide access to a variety of multimedia communication tools and forums for dissemination, including state and national conferences, web sites, and regular publications. In order to reach a national Hispanic audience, CAUSA, Inc. will approach agencies that sponsor nation-wide conferences (such as the United States Hispanic Leadership Conference and the National Council of La Raza) for an opportunity to present Project Nexo to other Hispanic organizations. We will also issue regular press advisories and reports in hard copy and through the Project Nexo web site and offer tours of the Centers to disseminate the model.

4. PROJECT FEASIBILITY

4.A. Technical Approach. CAUSA agencies have extremely limited computer capabilities and no existing networks. Only 8 have connection to the Internet, all at low-bandwidth. This project will equip five CAUSA agencies with state-of-the-art Windows 2000 server-based Ethernet (10/100) networks with high-bandwidth connection to the Internet via newly-installed Asynchronous Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) connections from SNET, a subsidiary of SBC, the telecommunications giant. The remaining seven CAUSA agencies will be connected with ADSL lines as well and feature smaller Windows 98 peer-to-peer networks. Each Center server will be equipped with (a) Microsoft Exchange Server with replication across the five servers for e-mail access, (b) Windows and server-based Adult Education software from NTC/Contemporary Books¹¹ and Virtual Private Networking software to enable secure communication across sites. Each of the five networked Computer Access Centers will feature 12 Pentium III 500mhz computers with Microsoft Office 2000. Three of the desktops will be equipped with Web cameras and White Pine Internet Video-conferencing software for live Internet video communication. Staff computers will also be upgraded. (See Budget Schedule 5, AOS specifications, and Attachment 6 for details).

The system is state-of-the art yet uses standard components designed to interact without issue with the systems of every partner involved in the project. The Technical Work Group of the Project Advisory Committee will ensure that all specifications support this interoperability.

CAUSA worked with its technology partners SNET, AOS, and the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium to evaluate many technological alternatives to support the learning goals of the project, including Internet Access via T-1 or fractional T-1 lines, higher bandwidth network capability, and ISDN-based videoconferencing solutions. SNET and AOS have both been working with schools and communities intensively in recent years to increase use of technology in the educational process and among non-profit agencies. The team settled on the proposed technical solution because it offers the best balance between cost, proven reliability, and performance, is readily maintained, and is fairly easily replicable to other sites.

The Computer Access Centers will accommodate substantial growth in usage through expanded hours of service and the ability to add additional computers as customer demand grows and resources permit. CAUSA will also work with additional member agencies beyond the first five to secure resources for replication of the basic model developed in this project.

CAUSA agencies will enter into a comprehensive network maintenance contract with a private vendor to ensure the smooth operation and maintain of the five Windows 2000 servers,

¹¹ This is the same self-paced educational software used by several of the local Adult Education Partners involved.

networks, and desktop machines. The system is designed to facilitate upgrades as needed.

4.B. Training. All project staff will undergo extensive professional development to prepare them to operate the equipment, the Center and the program.

4.C. Applicant Qualifications. The Project Executive Committee, composed of the Executive Directors of the five CAUSA agencies developing the Centers, will hire a skilled Project Director with a college degree and technical and management experience to implement the project. CAUSA Directors have an average of 10 years of agency and project management experience. Each Agency will also appoint a Center Director with technical computer and educational experience to oversee the day-to-day operations of the Computer Access Centers. (See Attachment 4, Position Descriptions). The project will benefit from a Project Advisory Committee comprised of experienced representatives of partner agencies with substantial technical expertise in computer networking (AOS, SNET), distance learning (CDLC, Adult Education providers), and workforce development (CTDOL, CWDC). This committee will meet once per month for the first three months of the project to ensure timely initial implementation of the project. After the first three months, the Committee will use meetings and e-mail to review and monitor the progress of the project through the regular 6-month evaluations and make recommendations for project modification. These partners will provide extensive technical assistance in the start-up and operation of the project. Holt, Wexler & Farnam, LLP, an experienced evaluation firm, will conduct the independent, thorough evaluation of the project.

4.D. Budget, Implementation Schedule, Timeline, and Sustainability. CAUSA member agencies have committed staff, technology and other resources to facilitate Project Nexa for a combined total contribution that exceeds \$300,000. The combined matching funds as a result of the partnerships with the Connecticut State Departments of Labor and Social Services, the Connecticut Workforce Development Council, SNET, and Asset Management is over \$129,000. CAUSA directors are confident that these Centers will be sustainable with local resources once a sound track record is established (See Budget Narrative and Statement of Matching Funds for detail).

Project start-up will begin immediately on grant award. Centers will be operational by the fourth month of the project, with educational programming. The Executive Directors from each agency will review overall success of service delivery improvements to clients and review the recommendations of the Committee at their regular monthly meetings. The Executive Directors will also take advantage of e-mail and web-cast technology to share ideas and information (See Attachment 3, Project Timeline for a detailed description of the implementation schedule).

5. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

5.A. Partnerships. The following table lists the important partnerships as part of the development of Project Nexa. For detailed descriptions of each partner and their contribution to Project Nexa, please see Attachment 7 and the attached support letters from each partner.

5.B. Involvement of the community. CAUSA, Inc. member agencies have identified both education and technology as critical needs for the success of their mission for the last several years. These trends were confirmed by various studies, data, and surveys that pertained to the

Project Nexa Partners	
<p>Technology Partners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ SNET ▪ Advanced Office Systems (AOS) 	<p>Social Services/Information Partners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ United Way/Infoline ▪ Department of Social Services (DSS)
<p>Educational Partners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Charter Oak State College (COSC) ▪ Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium (CTDLC) ▪ State Department of Education ▪ State Vocational Technical Schools ▪ Local Adult Education Programs 	<p>Workforce/Career Development Partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Connecticut Workforce Development Council (CWDC) ▪ Department of Labor (DOL)

state of Hispanics in Connecticut and the Nation, and conducting client feedback sessions and meetings with leaders in the Hispanic community.

We contacted various educational, training and job services providers, such as Charter Oak State College, the Adult Education Programs, and the Department of Labor, and discovered that they were seeking their own solutions to address these acknowledged disparities present in the Hispanic community. Understanding that introducing a technologically based solution could address both the technology and the educational problems in one fell swoop, we worked with these providers, SNET and AOS to design a delivery infrastructure that could meet all of our needs. The concept was developed, honed and brought back to the community via the CAUSA, Inc. agencies for review and comment.

Our confidence in Project Nexa’s success is bolstered by the finding that, interestingly, in the face of the lack of access to computers and the Internet compared to society at large, Hispanics are still the most likely of all racial/ethnic groups to use and pursue online courses (50% compared to 30% of whites).¹² Furthermore, at one focus group conducted (in Spanish) at Latino Youth Development, one participant noted, “My daughter is learning all about computers at school. I want to be able to learn how to use computers so we can stay close.” We are committed to providing the Hispanic community the opportunity to do so.

5.C. Support for end users. CAUSA, Inc. agency clientele primarily come from low-income communities and face significant obstacles to computer access and very limited exposure to computers or networking technology. A language barrier complicates matters. CAUSA, Inc. agency staff—of whom most are bilingual—will be trained on how to answer questions and provide computer tutoring during the operating hours of the public computer access centers. In addition, Project Nexa partners have committed to providing specialized support to CAUSA, Inc. clientele as they move through their piece of the lifelong learning and career development initiative. (See partner letters in the appendices).

¹² Ibid.

5.D. Privacy and Confidentiality. CAUSA, Inc., its member agencies, and its partners will ensure that client privacy and confidentiality are protected at all times. Technical partners will assist in developing appropriate controls and protocols.

6. REDUCING DISPARITIES

6.A. Disparity. See section 1 for information concerning disparate needs for the Hispanic population in Connecticut.

6.B. Strategy for Overcoming Barriers to Access. Cost is cited as the major barrier for Hispanics in accessing computer and Internet resources.¹³ Project Nexo will make computers and Internet available at our Community-based organizations—located in five neighborhoods throughout Connecticut where Hispanic individuals live and work—to counteract this barrier. The public access centers and the lifelong learning and career development initiative to provide the link between the Hispanic community’s need for technological and educational resources and successful attainment of that goal and intend for this initiative to increase the number of Hispanics currently taking advantage of computer and Internet resources.

In addition to the educational benefits associated with Project Nexo, the creation of the publicly accessible infrastructure will also provide a technological equivalent to the traditional plaza for Connecticut’s Hispanic community. Clients will have the capability and encouragement to come together, through email, message boards, chat groups, and website postings, on cultural and civic issues of importance to the Hispanic community. One study points to the importance of information access to reduce societal marginalization in the following way: “Information technology is transforming political communication and the delivery of public benefits, and without private and public points of access, many Latinos could be further marginalized from public life.”¹⁴ Project Nexo provides the required public point of access.

7. EVALUATION AND DOCUMENTATION

7.A. Evaluators. CAUSA will retain the consulting firm of Holt, Wexler & Farnam, LLP (HWF) to evaluate the proposed TOP program. HWF is a full-service consulting firm that: a) has extensive experience in cross-site program evaluation (see Appendices, Contractual Services – Firm Description 1); b) experience in working with CAUSA; and c) bilingual staff.

7.B. Evaluation Strategy. Project evaluation will examine process and outcome measures across three levels of analysis: a) the extent to which implementation activities occur in a timely manner; b) changes in service levels and organizational capacity as a result of new technology solutions; and c) the overall impact of the TOP program as it relates to consumers. Attachment 5 describes the relevant evaluation questions across each of these domains.

- § Evaluators will rely primarily on interviews, focus groups, personnel records (e.g., skill changes as a result of training), and service utilization logs to document progress associated with early implementation.
- § Evaluators will use to track service center usage and individual participation an innovative Bar Code card swipe system (developed by the Connecticut DOL to track usage in the self-service areas of their job centers) and reports generated by the Adult Education software package and higher education partners.

¹³ “Falling through the Net: The Digital Divide,” National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999.

¹⁴ “Latinos and Information Technology: Perspectives for the 21st Century,” Thomas Rivera Policy Institute, 1996.

§ Evaluators will design a two-group comparison study to assess individual outcomes (e.g., wage levels, educational attainment) for individuals who use technology-enhanced services v. individuals who use traditional services.

7.C. Data Collection. Evaluators will conduct interviews, convene focus groups and collect primary data from records or newly devised instruments. Evaluators will utilize data from the Bar Code Usage Tracking System. Develop on-site data collection forms for staff to record technology utilization (e.g., participation of consumers in training activities). Evaluators will develop protocols to document: a) changes in technology-related skills of the staff; b) program design issues (e.g., new partners, new products) that related to four groups (Executive Directors of CAUSA member agencies, agency member staff, partner agencies, and other key informants); and c) end user satisfaction. Evaluators will develop and execute information sharing protocols with partner agencies to document the extent to which consumers are using partners Internet-based services and to determine the extent to which consumers moving off of welfare.

Attachment 5 shows the relevant data sets associated with each evaluation question. **7.D.**

Reporting Schedule. Evaluators will share findings with the Technical Committee in the following manner: a) quarterly updates discussing progress and emerging process-related issues; b) semi-annual briefing papers that include process issues and outcome evaluation findings; and c) year-end evaluation reports. This feedback loop will assist the Project Nexa Technical Committee in making mid-course corrections throughout the entire implementation schedule.