

**TOP FY 2000
Project Narrative**

Mississippi Action for Community Education

**Grant # 28-60-00017
Greenville, MS**

1. PROJECT PURPOSE

A. Need: Mississippi Action for Community Education, Inc. (MACE) respectfully requests \$200,000 over a three-year period from the Technology Opportunities Program (TOP) to support the Community Entrepreneurship & Technology Empowerment Project (CETEP). This innovative undertaking will improve communication links between seven community-based organizations and area institutions of higher learning via the Internet and computer video-conferencing systems in order to provide communication technologies, leadership development and entrepreneurial education programs to low-income communities. Using two-way video communication, community organizers, leadership development training facilitators, students and other low-income residents who, because of distance, cultural, racial and rural isolation would not normally be able to access information and training opportunities will be able to meet and discuss issues, plan and undertake cooperative projects. They will learn basic computer skills, receive leadership development training, job skills and have access to the whole array of online learning opportunities offered through State and community colleges.

This project addresses two interrelated issues: The first concerns the isolation of low-income rural communities in our service area that results from living in a rural southern environment fragmented along racial and economic lines, together with the sheer geographic distance (it is over 145 miles between our two most distant community partners); The second is a crippling lack of access to local educational, training and technology resources for low-income residents with limited access to public or private transportation in isolated rural areas.

MACE and its partners are currently implementing several initiatives designed to address these issues. MACE is currently implementing a job training initiative funded by the Department of Labor that targets low-income women for training in construction-related skills (our target is that eighty percent of participants will be women). With funding from the Ms. Foundation for Women and the Small Business Administration, MACE and its partners are implementing an entrepreneurial education program for low-income women. As part of our expanded offering of this program we will be actively encouraging the participation of men also (primarily through our newsletter and Affiliate network). Legally, they cannot be excluded. This program consists of sixteen weeks of classes (three hours per week) designed to provide forty low-income women per year with basic instruction in all the aspects of what it takes to start and run a micro-enterprise. This includes accounting, marketing, credit access and management and other general and personal management skills essential to success. This is followed up by technical assistance to those who start businesses. An important part of this program is MACE's leadership development training program, the Bannerman Training Institute (BTI).

MACE is licensed by the Pacific Training Institute as a facilitator of its Investment in Excellence Program. This is a world-renowned program that has an excellent reputation for helping persons develop the leadership skills necessary for success in personal and professional enterprises. Over the past year we have had excellent feedback from participants in the BTI program indicating that an expanded delivery would be welcomed. With both the BTI program, the Welfare to Work program, and the Jump-Start Program we had interest from people and organizations throughout the Delta who were unable to participate due to the great travel distance that would have been involved. Initially, the Jump-Start program was designed to serve

only fifteen participants; however, interest was overwhelming. Nearly one hundred persons applied and many were from far ends of the Delta (as far away as fifty miles in some).

In addition to the aforementioned programs, several of our partners are implementing services that would benefit from video-conferencing technology. Quitman County Development Organization has an after-school program for teenagers that could use videoconferencing to provide increased access to opportunities for training and education. Our partners in Humphreys and Sharkey counties are interested in increasing access to adult learning opportunities.

B. Solution: MACE and its partners, Humphreys County Union for Progress, Inc. (HCUP), Madison County Union for Progress Inc., (MCUP), Quitman County Development Organization, Inc., (QCDO, see Attachment), Sharkey-Issaquena County Improvement Association, Inc., (SICIA), Glendora Economic Community Development Corporation (GECDCO), and the Washington County Citizens for Advancement Program, Inc., (WCCAP) will address these challenges by accomplishing the following:

By creating a community communications, education and information technology network that will be known as the Community Entrepreneurship & Technology Empowerment Project (CETEP). CETEP will establish links between our widely separated partner organizations. A network of seven public access service sites will be established. At three sites we would set up a video conferencing network. MACE would be the hub in the center of the Delta. QCDO's and HCUP's offices would house the conferencing centers at the southern and northern ends of our service area. MACE's Director of Special Projects, Lisa Tate, will coordinate the scheduling of use of the network and each Affiliate organization will assign a staff member to serve as a network liaison. All sites involved in this proposed network would be centered in low-income areas of the empowerment zone. This video conferencing network would allow us to offer our educational and technical assistance workshops, classes and services to many low-income residents who would otherwise be unable to reach us. Desktop video-conferencing would enable participants to engage in real time discussions with counterparts across the Delta and the State of Mississippi. Access to this technology would extend the reach of distance learning opportunities from colleges and universities that have compatible technology (such as Mississippi Valley State University (a historically Black university) and Mid-Delta Community College in Moorhead, Mississippi). MACE would develop online content that would be tailored to information desired by our constituency. Local volunteers will receive appropriate training and pass it on to fellow residents. MACE will take the lead in putting together an advisory council to oversee project implementation that will be composed of MACE, its Affiliate organizations, representatives of MDCC (MDCC is currently represented on the advisory board of our entrepreneurial education program) and Mississippi Valley State University (we are currently partnering with MVSU on a public school education reform initiative), as well as program participants

C. Content Overviews:

Our entrepreneurial education course participants learn the basic components of business and how they fit together in a successful organization. Understanding the lingo and culture of business increases their confidence in interviews and on the job. We focus on the basic elements of a small business marketing plan. This includes market identification methods as well as marketing channels and strategies. Instructors discuss small business loans and answer questions about income tax problems and issues. They learn effective techniques for collecting past due accounts, telephone techniques, and effective public relations. We provide a practical overview of keeping business accounting records designed to enable the entrepreneur to understand financial record-keeping.

Participants work with a team to originate an idea for a business and develop a business plan. They learn how to translate an idea into action through research and planning. Components include: 1) Purpose of the business plan 2) Information-gathering strategies 3) Sources of information 4) Formats for financial projections 5) Review of drafts and critiques of completed plans.

A major emphasis is placed on the importance of choosing the right business. Participants are confronted with the opportunities and challenges posed by current technological and demographic trends. They learn to use the Internet, the library, and their own network to get the information they need to build a business.

They create their own business cards and practice powerful presentations. They meet inspiring women business owners who can open doors to them now and in the years to come. We will provide them with technical and financial assistance to increase their effectiveness. (We currently have a revolving loan fund of \$50,000).

Participants receive some introductory instruction in basic word processing, spreadsheet applications, and on-line resources. We have obtained donations of used computer equipment from local businesses that we are using to set up strategically located computing centers for low-income small business people and other residents of our low-income service area.

Visits from outstanding women business owners provide real world experience and perspective to participants. Business owners share their own stories and expertise. These powerful role models form a valuable network for support long after the camp has ended.

Another important program that we will be able to offer is our leadership development training program. MACE has a long history of developing and nurturing grassroots leadership by providing leadership training and other technical assistance to members of our affiliate organizations in the surrounding communities. In 1999, MACE's leadership development program curriculum was reinvigorated with a revised curriculum and has been renamed as the "Bannerman Training Institute" (BTI). The BTI curriculum consists of five basic "building blocks" or courses: 1) Introduction to the MACE Model for Rural Development in the Delta; 2) Understanding the Delta Region; 3) Basic Leadership Skills; **4) Basic Principles and Theory of Community and Economic Development** and 5) Building Organizations and Coalitions for Community and Economic Development.

2. INNOVATION

CETEP will demonstrate a unique method of effectively delivering entrepreneurial education and technical assistance to low-income people using the latest video-conferencing technology. In a report titled "Income Support and Social Services for Low-Income People in Mississippi", Urban Institute researchers reported that:

"In Mississippi...case managers tend to believe that the community colleges are not interested in serving this population and therefore direct their clients to job service centers managed by the Mississippi Employment Service Commission. These job service centers...do not provide the more comprehensive services..."

MACE and its partners intend to show that our unique experiences providing services to low-income communities in our service area will position us to use video-conferencing technology to increase low-income people's access to educational and personal development assistance. Conversations with adult learning specialists at Mississippi Delta Community College and Jackson State University have indicated that past distance learning attempts with literacy-challenged adults from rural areas have not been very successful due to the limited interactivity of the available technology (via satellite with limited interaction). We hope to break new ground in adult education working with predominantly African American communities in the rural Mississippi Delta.

3. DIFFUSION POTENTIAL

At the end of the project period, MACE will convene a regional meeting open to citizens, rural development practitioners and representatives of university, development and government entities. This half-day forum will showcase program successes and share lessons learned. At this time, the final program report and the Lessons Learned Document will be made available to attendees. MACE will also use its regional and national network to distribute the Lessons Learned Document to key organizations and leaders across the country and post it on the organization's web site. Currently MACE's Department of Planning & Development publishes a newsletter that is circulated to about 1,000 persons and organizations in Mississippi and around the nation (see Attachment A). To further publicize the outcome of the CETEP project, we will do a special issue with double the normal circulation to target a larger number of community development organizations and associations around the country.

The problems that MACE must deal with in implementing CETEP are problems that exist in a similar fashion in other rural areas such as Appalachia and the Delta regions of Louisiana and Arkansas. Foremost among these problems are the triple obstacle of high levels of illiteracy, lack of skills and rural isolation. We will show that, by relying on a grassroots, community-based approach to training combined our unique leadership development curriculum, we can make a difference. We will demonstrate that the creative use of information technology can be an integral part of such an effort.

4. PROJECT FEASIBILITY

A. Technical Approach: Using frame relay, our Internet service provider (ISP)/network administrator at TecInfo, Inc. (Leland, MS) will tie all locations together into a frame cloud using dedicated access lines. This will allow multiple clients at each location. There will be enough dedicated bandwidth to allow video-conferencing at a rate of at least 15 frames per second. Each site will be equipped with a router that will accommodate at least 128 kilobytes per second. Each site will also use 16-port hubs in order to allow for future expansion. Each site we will have five workstations connected by a local area network. Each workstation will have Internet access and be equipped for video-conferencing.

We will be using video conferencing network technology designed by ATS Telephone and Data Systems, Inc. They have a regional office in Jackson, Mississippi. This design will rely on frame relay support such as that provided by Motorola's MPRouter™ family of products. This will enable the transport of any standards based, HDLC-oriented Constant Bit rate video stream for group videoconferencing on the same frame relay as data. This will allow us to avoid more costly alternatives. We would like to use VTEL-compatible equipment due to the fact that VTEL's technology is the predominant system in use at most of the State's universities and community colleges. Using VTEL-compatible software and hardware will ensure that we will be technologically compatible with most institutions of higher learning that our constituents would have a need to interface with. VTEL software is made to be compatible with Windows NT. We will use Windows NT as the network operating system and it will be configured so that it is compatible with Novell Netware networks currently in place at the offices of QCDO (in Quitman County, Mississippi) and MACE. The system will be designed to operate efficiently with the Internet connection purchased through our local service provider.

B. Applicant Qualifications: During MACE's thirty years of existence, the organization has achieved national prominence as an innovator in the development of rural leaders and the provision of critical services to impoverished communities. MACE has trained over 200 leaders from the Delta regions in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. The organization has also provided housing and municipal development services with regional economic impact of several million dollars. Through this proposed program, however, MACE would play a critical role in increasing technology access and utilization within impoverished communities as a means of furthering locally based empowerment efforts. To date, MACE has received two grants that are designed to develop technological capacity. These grants, received from the Southern Rural Development Initiative (SRDI) and the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, were designed to strengthen MACE's capacity to use technology. This Community Technology Centers Program proposal is designed to build upon lessons learned through prior grants by extending access to other grassroots organizations.

MACE will assemble a diverse project management team to oversee all aspects of CETEP. As President and CEO, Ruby Buck will serve as the contractual officer for MACE and as a member of the CETEP Advisory Board. Barbara Esters, MACE's Director of Finance, will oversee the budget management and reporting process. Clifton Whitley, Director of Planning and Development, an University of Texas M.B.A., will serve as the organization's liaison to the Community Technology Centers Program Office. He will also participate in initial orientation

sessions with MACE Field Services staff, program sponsors and partners. Mr. Whitley will also serve on the advisory committee. Ms. Lisa Raggs, Director of Field Services and Southern University law school graduate, will oversee the day-to-day management and coordination of all program activities. She will also have lead responsibility for leadership development curriculum activities. Jump-Start Program Director, Sharon Brown, a business school graduate, will have lead responsibility for all entrepreneurial education activities. A representative from TecInfo, Inc., our Internet service provider will serve as members of the project management team.

KEY CONSULTANTS:

TecInfo, Inc. is located in Leland, Mississippi eight miles from Greenville. TecInfo has extensive experience serving all types of businesses throughout this region. Until recently, it was the only Internet Service providing local service to all parts of our service area. Greg Hayman, TechInfo's manager has extensive experience designing and implementing LAN and WAN networking solutions for banks and many other businesses throughout the Mississippi Delta.

ATS Telephone & Data Systems, Inc. (ATS) The technicians at ATS are the only experts in this area on the design, implementation and configuration of VTEL video-conferencing systems. They are uniquely equipped to provide the support and maintenance that will be necessary to ensure success.

5. Involvement of the Community

MACE's Board of Directors is comprised of at least two representatives from each of the partner organizations that will work with us to achieve the targeted outcomes (see Appendix E). As previously mentioned, MACE's Field Services Division is currently working to implement a conference on public school reform that will involve parent, teacher and school superintendent organizations. Ruby Buck, MACE's president and CEO currently serves on the advisory board for the Greenville Public Schools and in the past year, representatives of the school district, other area non-profits (including representatives of our partner organizations and neighboring communities) have participated in the Investment in Excellence portion of the Bannerman Training Institute.

In addition the Jump-Start program's advisory board includes representation from a broad cross-section of the community: Marilyn Hansell is Special Projects Director for the Congressman from the second Congressional District. John Greer, Jr. is a Facilitator with the Small Business Administration's local office. Chuck Herring is Director of the Small Business Development Center at Mississippi Delta Community College. Roosevelt Sanders is Director of Economic & Community Development for the Mid-Delta One Stop Capital Shop on the campus of Mississippi Valley State University. Bess Condon is the retired owner of the Condon Pharmacies chain of stores. Mary Golliday is a retired administrator of the Delta Foundation, a local nonprofit that provides financing to small businesses. Robert Jackson is President of the Quitman County Development Organization (see Appendix D).

The **end users** targeted by C-TEP are the school district personnel, educators, non-profit organizations and low-income citizens that MACE has worked with historically. We will carry out a random sample survey of persons in the target area in order to help us customize the level of training and information dissemination that will be necessary. This will allow us to gather information about the interests of residents. We have already held extensive discussions with other potential partner organizations, Dr. Tony Honeycutt (Dean of Workforce Development at Mississippi Delta Community College) and with Ms. Carolyn Higgins, Director of Jackson State University's Continuing Education Learning Center concerning the need for a high level of interactivity tailored to the needs of those with limited literacy levels. Our approach will become more refined as these discussions continue. During the first year, at each site, appropriate training will be provided to site managers by the Network Manager so they can assist welfare and low-income recipients to acquire the skills necessary to use the network. In the interim, member organizations will enlist volunteers to assist their less computer-literate neighbors in navigating the web.

6. REDUCING DISPARITIES

Mississippi is the most underdeveloped state in the United States and the Delta is the most underdeveloped region of Mississippi. Only 88% of households in Mississippi have telephones. Only 21% of households have a computer. Our service area has the highest number of African Americans living below the poverty level in rural areas than any other area. Statistics show that low-income African Americans in rural areas are the least likely to have a computer or telephone in their home. In addition, as outlined earlier, there is a tremendous need for education and training in an area that has not benefitted proportionately from recent economic trends.

Through the CETEP project, MACE and its partners will use their unique history of working effectively with low-income communities in the Mississippi Delta. We are well positioned to reach them *and* relate to their needs. We will tailor education, training and location decisions to suit the needs of our constituency. By funding this program, the Community Technology Centers Program can truly break technological ground for a segment of the population that no one has been reaching successfully here in Mississippi.

7. EVALUATION DOCUMENTATION & DISSEMINATION

MACE and its partners expect to achieve the following results:

- i. Double, from forty to eighty, the number of low-income persons receiving entrepreneurial education each year. Our target will be for approximately half these new participants (via video-conferencing) to be men.
- ii. In the first year of the entrepreneurial education program, we had twenty-four participants (currently there are forty). Out of those twenty-four, six started new small businesses. We hope to maintain this proportion of those proceeding to start new businesses (roughly 25% of participants).
- iii. To double the number of those completing our leadership training from twenty per year to forty per year.

- iv. To demonstrate the innovative use of video-conferencing technology as an integral part of our training programs targeting low-income persons.
- v. Gain insights and understanding into the most effective means to involve low-income persons in information technology.
- iv. Each year expose at least 300 low-income persons and/or youth to extended opportunities for continuing education.

A. Evaluation Strategy

This project will seek an experienced independent evaluator who is knowledgeable of techniques used to scientifically evaluate quantitative and qualitative data in longitudinal studies. In preliminary discussions Mississippi Valley State University has agreed to refer us to someone on their staff who will direct the evaluation process (see attached letter). This evaluator will employ an evaluation strategy designed to respond to the following:

- To what extent are participants satisfied with the level of services offered?
- How many participants were served in various ways?
- How is this project designed to build upon and improve existing capacities?
- What new innovations in program delivery will be introduced to the service area through the effective implementation of this project?
- How has this program contributed to enhance life for program participants?
- What tangible improvements occurred in the delivery of services to the target group?
- What specific successes or challenges were encountered?

The quantitative component of this strategy will incorporate the following activities:

- Development of a detailed survey instrument that will be completed by providers of program services on a monthly basis to measure services rendered;
- Development of a questionnaire that will be completed by program sponsors and providers on a biannual basis to assess achievement of program benchmarks; and
- Development of a survey instrument to be completed by program participants or recipients of program services.

This program will aim to produce these specific documents:

- 18-Month Report focusing on progress to date.
- End-of Program Report focusing on successes, challenges and opportunities for replication.
- Lessons Learned Document focusing on stakeholders experiences.

The outside evaluator will conduct interviews to clarify survey results and findings. A protocol document will be developed to insure confidentiality and privacy issues. Names of persons interviewed will not be presented in any report or document without prior permission.