October 2009

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act for Georgia Libraries

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Recommended Citation

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The Recovery Act appropriated $7.2 billion and directed the Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service (RUS) and The Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications Information Administration (NTIA) to expand broadband access to unserved and underserved communities across the U.S., increase jobs, spur investments in technology and infrastructure, and provide long-term economic benefits. The result is the RUS Broadband Initiatives Program (BIP) and the NTIA Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP). BIP will make loans and grants for broadband infrastructure projects in rural areas. BTOP will provide grants to fund broadband infrastructure, public computer centers and sustainable broadband adoption projects (USDA.gov, 2009).

More than 360 applications were filed with NTIA, requesting more than $1.9 billion in grants from BTOP for public computer center projects, which will expand access to broadband service and enhance broadband capacity at public libraries, community colleges, and other institutions that provide the benefits of broadband to the general public or specific vulnerable populations (Tolbert, 2009). This grant program is highly competitive. Only $50 million were allotted for this first round. That leaves $1.85 billion that will not be funded.

Institute of Museums and Library Services (IMLS) sent out a press release on August 27, 2009 announcing a need for peer reviewers to help review the numerous grant applications. It is too late for the first round reviewers but if anyone is interested in later rounds please send your resume to BTOPreviewer@ntia.doc.gov . Expertise in several areas is required. A list of required qualifications can be found at http://www.imls.gov/news/2009/082709.shtm.

The program guidelines and definitions were very restrictive and were questioned by the Congressional Subcommittee on Rural Development. USDA Deputy Under Secretary for Rural Development Cheryl Cook, in a July 9 hearing before the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Rural Development, Biotechnology, Specialty Crops, and Foreign Agriculture, testified that USDA had carefully reviewed and will continue to consider modifications for the next round. They wanted to avoid additional delay in the application process by making the change in this first round. In fairness to all applicants and to allow any changes to the Broadband Initiative Program to be based on actual experience with the first NOFA, Rural Development has deferred any clarifications or

modifications until the second NOFA, about which discussions are taking place (USDA.gov, 2009). As hoped by everyone involved in the grant application process, the second NOFA for the broadband grants will contain clarifications and modifications that were found needed in the NOFA for the first round.

According to the schedule provided in the August 2009 BTOP Quarterly Status Report to Congress, the NOFA for the second round will be released in winter 2009, which would translate to December 21 – 31, 2009. No dates have been provided for the deadline for applications. The third round is slated for spring 2010, with no dates for the application deadlines. The schedule makes note that all BTOP funds will be awarded by September 30, 2010, which is a statutory deadline.

Georgia will coordinate a statewide application for public computer centers for libraries as anchor institutions in several areas of the state in the second round. At this time, Tim Daniels is the contact person for formulating the grant application. At least six library systems have turned in their own applications for the first round of funding. Those include Athens Regional, Atlanta-Fulton County and DeKalb County Partnership, South Georgia Regional, Sara Hightower, and Hall County Library Systems. Congratulations on accomplishing that difficult task and best of luck with reviewers. ⏭

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