

US Conference of Mayors

Award of Excellence in Public/Private Partnerships Application

Name of Project: City of Elizabeth and Verizon: Innovative Access – Expanding Opportunities and Creating Effective Services

Executive Summary

The City of Elizabeth is the fourth largest municipality in the State of New Jersey with a population of 126,179 according to the 2006 Census estimate. As the largest municipality in Union County, innovative communications and the creation of educational opportunities are of vital importance to maintaining and improving the quality of life within an urban city. Therefore, the City of Elizabeth embarked upon an ambitious initiative to participate in Verizon's Access New Jersey, which provides deeply discounted communication services to enable access to the Internet in low and moderate income communities. Through upgrading the communication capabilities within the Elizabeth Public Library, residents and visitors alike have benefited from an enhanced and modern communication center, which they can utilize and enjoy.

Prior to this communications initiative, the Elizabeth Public Library did not provide free Internet access to the community. Beginning in 1998, Verizon initiated a statewide program named Access New Jersey, which focused upon providing Internet access to public libraries and school communities throughout New Jersey. Verizon accomplished this objective in the City of Elizabeth by investing \$200,000, providing twelve routers and upgrades, as well as providing deeply discounted Internet access to libraries and schools. The supplied routers enabled the Elizabeth Main Public Library to link to the Internet. In addition, Verizon provided more than \$1.3 million in equipment and services to the Elizabeth public school system.

Identifying the vital need for education, research, and communication services, the Elizabeth Main Public Library installed 200 computer stations throughout the building. Today, more than 13,159 individuals use the services of the Internet at this location per year. Private Internet providers require a monthly fee to be paid, which could be costly. This cost provides a barrier to information, access, and workforce opportunities vital to the enrichment of students and adults alike. Students attending elementary, middle, high school as well as colleges, require the utilization of Internet services to increase literacy, complete assignments, and even attend on-line lectures for web courses. All of the abovementioned items require the use of a computer as well as Internet service. Adults and older students also use the Internet as a critical resource for workforce development as well as a search vehicle for job opportunities. Recognizing the monetary hardship this may cause, the City of Elizabeth welcomed this communication partnership with Verizon to meet the literacy, education, and workforce development needs of the community.

There are more than thirty-seven languages spoken throughout Elizabeth's diverse community. Therefore, the Elizabeth Public Library provides location services to incorporate extensive English as a Second Language (ESL) program. With free instruction from the Literacy Volunteers of Union County, the Internet provides an array of tools to enhance language skills and assist individuals through the learning process. In addition, the Community Learning Network provides free instruction on the utilization of the computer as well as select basic programs.

The Main Branch of the Elizabeth Public Library is located within the heart of the City's Historic Midtown District, and is open to the public. In addition to being a rich cultural and diverse City, Elizabeth also serves as the Union County seat, drawing a significant increase in population during the work week.

Providing exciting educational and rewarding activities, the Elizabeth Public Library is both a place of learning and recreation. As a destination for research, the Library provides access to books, periodicals, videocassettes, DVDs, as well as the Internet.

The Elizabeth Public Library is surrounded by approximately 90 retail shops, 150 service providers, and the area is frequented by residents, workers, and visitors on a daily basis. Elizabeth is home to the Union County Courthouse and the Union County Administration Building, which are respectively located along and adjacent to Broad Street. The Elizabeth Main Public Library is also located in close proximity to the Historic Midtown Elizabeth Train Station. As a transportation hub, the Midtown Train Station is a destination for commuters traveling in and out of Elizabeth from throughout the tri-state area. The Elizabeth Public Library is also registered on both the National and State of New Jersey historic registries.

There are approximately 50 Full-Time employees and approximately 10 Part-Time employees working within the Elizabeth Public Library. The City of Elizabeth is a destination of choice and holds numerous events in coordination with the Elizabeth Public Library at this location. Those events include, but are not limited to: the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) annual celebration as well as the Special Eyes on the Environment (S.E.E.) photographic showcase, the Colombian Independence Week events, the NAACP Reorganization meeting, as well as the 2000 Census kickoff.

The Elizabeth Public Library implements numerous initiatives to bring learning opportunities to the public. Those initiatives include, but are not limited to: the Elizabeth Local History Room, which includes books, *The Elizabeth Daily Journal* and its index, as well as maps, photos and additional records; Hispanic Heritage Month, which takes place from September 15 – October 15, will feature Spanish Language Film Night, a Salsa Workshop, teen author, art exhibit, as well as a genealogy database workshop.

Elizabeth continues to grow, yielding the need for additional services. With the evident increase in population and housing opportunities, families are looking to Elizabeth to live and raise a family. Therefore the need for advanced technological services has increased to accommodate the new communities created in this area. Through educational and communication initiatives, such as the partnership with Verizon, the City of Elizabeth continues to work to increase literacy, expand workforce development opportunities, and enhance the quality of life throughout the community.

The private/public partnership that the City of Elizabeth enjoys with Verizon has contributed immensely to the municipality's ability to provide efficient and effective technological, workforce development, and literacy enhancing services to the residents of Elizabeth.