Project: South Billings Education, Training and Skills Development Support Center

Brief Description: Montana State University Billings requests $750,000 for development of a pilot program to establish a comprehensive Education, Training and Skills Development Support Center on Billings' South Side. The goal is to provide a series of education, skills development training and support services to low-income and under-represented groups to enable them to become more employable and to expand the workforce in the Billings area.

Executive summary: Billings' South Side is home to a large number of low-income and under-represented groups. According to Census data, about 1,600 Hispanics and 1,000 American Indians live in South Billings. A smaller, but just as significant number of blacks also live in the area. A number of households are headed by single-parent workers. Churches, families, key segments of the business sector and dedicated community leaders help keep the culture of that area alive, but many residents of the area have to cope with lack of transportation, day care, job opportunity, intimidation, crime, delinquency and few opportunities for education. Census data for Census Tract 3 shows that only 11% of the adult population has earned a 2- or 4-year college degree while almost 35% of the adult population in South Billings have not completed high school or even earned a GED limiting earnings and economic opportunities.

Training alone is not enough to allow these individuals to improve their employment opportunities and deal with the many obstacles they face to improve their economic and social situations. An education, skills development and support center is needed that will focus not only on workforce development to fill a variety of jobs, but also on issues to assure student success. The center, located in the old Garfield School — a safe and well-known location for many minority, unemployed and underemployed populations — will address workforce and educational shortfalls. MSU Billings, in collaboration with the Yellowstone Boys and Girls Ranch, has established an outreach center at Garfield School where basic computer classes and other training takes place. This proposal will provide updated equipment, supplies and materials to expand not only education, but other services (such as child care) for the citizens of the South Side. On an academic level, the key will be customized short-term, hands-on training. Certifications will include college-ready, workforce ready certifications to help raise overall educational attainment in this key area of the community.

Project Description: The urban education and training approach would be two-pronged. Developmental and remedial level coursework would be offered to prepare participants for continuation of their education at a higher level. In addition, specific training would be provided to develop marketable job skills. Consequently, the center would include day care facilities and transportation options. While there would have to be regular staffing and hours for child care, those using the center would also have to commit to a co-op arrangement, through which they would help with the operation and upkeep of the center. Funds are requested for computer hardware, IT development, software packages, facility renovation, staffing and initial administrative expenses. Long-term sustainability will come from industry partnerships, grants, FTE generation, state support for new faculty and other revenue streams.

Congressional Action Needed: An appropriation of $750,000 is requested.

Importance to Montana: Billings is the largest city in Montana with a much more diversified employment base than elsewhere in the state. The city and county also have the highest number of minority groups especially Hispanics, Native Americans and blacks. At the same time, these minority groups have the highest unemployment and underemployment rates in the state. The South Side Billings Education, Training and Skills Development Support Center will address these issues through a centralized, safe location. The first cohort would be 50 to 75 people who did not previously have the opportunities to succeed.

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