**RURAL
LISC**

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Rural LISC Awards $125k Grant to Plan Regional Digital Workforce Development Program in South Texas

IDRA to facilitate planning for an experiential learning program for students in the Texas Rio Grande Valley (RGV)

Washington, D.C. – Rural LISC today announced a $125,000 grant award to the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) to work with local governments, internet service providers (ISPs), educational and workforce organizations, and nonprofits to create a regional plan for a comprehensive, culturally-competent digital workforce development program.

The grant award will support local planning and program design for "LevelUp RGV: A Digital Workforce Program" for high school and college students. The program will include structured coursework and paid internships in information technology (IT), broadband network design and build, community digital navigators, and cybersecurity. In addition, all learning paths will include mentorship, professional development skills, internet safety and security, bilingual customer service training, and digital inclusion policy and advocacy.

The program will establish a foundation for competitive applications to bring in federal and state grants from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) programs, which will begin awarding projects as soon as 2024. "Today's fastest-growing careers are technology-driven," said IDRA President & CEO Celina Moreno, J.D. "IDRA's long-standing partnerships with communities in the Texas Rio Grande Valley to advance educational equity for students and families will find new traction with a growing RGV regional coalition and new federal and state funding opportunities."

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 67% of all new jobs in STEM are in computing. Yet, the RGV has been recognized by the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas and the National Digital Inclusion Alliance as having the least connected communities in the country.

IDRA, a national education equity nonprofit, will facilitate development of the workforce plan in collaboration with several municipal and county governments, Team Pharr.Net, VTX1 Companies, BTX Fiber, SmartCom, CobbFendley Engineering, Brownstone Consulting, Connect Humanity, ARISE Adelante, La Union Del Pueblo Entero, Region One Education Service Center, cdcb | Come Dream. Come Build, South Texas College, and other regional workforce partners.

"Just three years ago Pharr, Texas, was considered the worst-connected city in the nation. The mayor, the school district, and community members got together to change that. Today, high-

capacity internet is arriving, neighborhood by neighborhood, with intentions to cover surrounding colonias as well," said Christa Vinson, senior program officer for broadband at Rural LISC. "We're excited to extend that momentum to incorporate a labor market strategy that will prepare the local high school and post-secondary workforce for the good-paying jobs that go along with the high-speed broadband that's being built now in Pharr, and -- if the IIJA is successful—all across in the region."

Local industries, including ISPs, are creating the demand for workforce development initiatives like LevelUp RGV. In the digital economy, keeping up with the pace of technological change by fine-tuning curriculums, incorporating new skills and credentials, and deepening partnerships between employers and training organizations is key to a resilient workforce.

"My company's number-one concern is workforce," said Dolly Villareal, president of the board of VTX1 Companies. "We're doing everything we can to ensure more of our local higher education institutions are providing the training that will grow our local workforce and regional economy."

Local leadership believes the result will be a boon to local economic development and regional growth. "Last year, Pharr's municipal IT department doubled its customer service and fiber optic installation staff, but those new employees didn't receive their training and certification locally. We want the future fiber broadband workforce to train and be certified in South Texas," said Dr. Ambrosio Hernandez, mayor of the City of Pharr.

To access details on Rural LISC's work across its five core pillars, visit www.lisc.org/rural.

To learn more about IDRA and LevelUp RGV, visit https://www.idra.org/services/idra-levelup-rgv/.

About Rural LISC
Launched in 1995, Rural LISC is the rural component of LISC (Local Initiative Support Corporation), the largest community development support organization in the country. Through a partnership base of over 145 organizations spread across 49 states and Puerto Rico, Rural LISC provides a wide range of services, including financial support, training, technical assistance and capital resources to help rural community partners and developers invest in rural communities. To date, Rural LISC has leveraged nearly $3.3 billion from public and private sources to produce 35,000 affordable homes and apartments. Rural LISC investments have also produced over 4 million square feet of commercial and community space, including 20 early childhood care centers. Rural LISC technical assistance has touched more than 700 businesses, resulting in over 12,000 jobs supported and/or retained. Rural LISC is committed to ensuring equity and investment in rural America. Learn more at www.lisc.org/rural.

About IDRA (Intercultural Development Research Association)
IDRA is a national independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Its mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education

by leading policy analyses and advocacy; dynamic teacher training and principal coaching; useful research, evaluation and frameworks for action; and innovative student, family and community engagement.

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