

COMMUNITIES OF OPPORTUNITY: MOVING FORWARD IN 2006

The Communities of Opportunity Team at the Foundation for the Mid South is pleased to share an overview of the history and the major accomplishments of the Communities of Opportunity Initiative during 2005. The overarching goal of this initiative is to establish a long-term, sustainable, resident-driven community change process in two selected sites – St. Francis County in Arkansas and Leflore County in Mississippi.

The COO Initiative has the following specific goals:

- Goal I:** Establish a **County Council** that includes community residents, the traditional “unheard voices” and community sectors to develop and guide the implementation of a community change action plan.
- Goal II:** **Education reform** that provides leadership development, incorporates support programs, and empowers/engages parents and community leaders in the development of programs and schools of excellence for all children (pre-K – 12), regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic level.
- Goal III:** **Leadership development** that includes resident mobilization, training and technical assistance; non-profit development; and other sector specific training.
- Goal IV:** **Economic development** that includes individual asset development; workforce development; business sector development and/or enhancement; and micro-enterprise development.
- Goal V:** **Community development** that focuses on infrastructure needs that may include housing, transportation, childcare, technology, etc. as determined by the county council.
- Goal VI:** Institute a grantor, grantee, and community **learning agenda** at the regional and national levels.
- Goal VII:** Implement a plan for **building philanthropy** at the community level.

History – During the summer of 2002, the Foundation for the Mid South was invited to submit a planning proposal to the Walton Family Foundation to initiate a planning process for a major community change initiative that will focus on targeted communities in the Delta of Arkansas and Mississippi. The planning process resulted in an implementation proposal and work plan for these communities to develop their potential. During the October meeting of the FMS Board of Directors, a request to include a Louisiana site was made by Board members, with the expectation that funds to support

this site would have to be allocated from another source. Proposed Communities of Opportunity to be funded by the Walton Family Foundation included the following sites – St. Francis County in Arkansas and Leflore County in Mississippi. A planning grant proposal was approved by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to support Morehouse Parish in Louisiana; however, Kellogg did not approve an implementation grant for the Louisiana Site.

The Communities of Opportunity Initiative is an outgrowth of a long history of the Foundation for the Mid South's work to build communities in the region. This work has focused on, among other things, community change (Workforce Alliance), community services (Families and Children), community leadership (African American Faith-Based), community engagement in education (Middle Start), community economic development (Sectoral Employment), and asset building (IDAs).

In addition to the work that FMS has been doing in the past decade, there have been other infusions of resources to communities in the Mid South, particularly in the Delta. Some of these – both public and private – are as follows:

- Enterprise Communities (USDA and HUD);
- Enterprise Corporation of the Delta regional offices, community sector strategies, and business lending;
- Southern Development Bancorporation purchase of community banks and economic development strategies in the Delta;
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Mid South Delta Initiative to fund economic development collaborative efforts;
- Ford Foundation's Rural Community College Initiative to improve community colleges that serve low-income communities;
- Mid South Delta LISC (Local Initiative Support Corporation) building community development corporations and funding housing development;
- New Markets Initiative for tax credits in distressed areas to promote business development; and
- The Delta Regional Authority.

Until now, we have not had the structure or the resources to pursue a place-based strategy that can combine the Foundation's experience – and especially what has been accomplished in ten years of intensive work in the successful Workforce Alliance communities – into a long-term, focused, comprehensive, community-based effort to truly change the ways that communities can work together to improve themselves.

Over these last ten years, the Walton Family Foundation (WFF) has had a specific interest in the Delta. By way of its substantial funding of FMS and key partners (ECD, Southern, LISC, and others), the Walton Family Foundation has provided tens of millions of dollars to build the Delta. The recent interest of WFF in developing a comprehensive strategy to focus on a small number of Delta communities in an intensive manner resulted in their invitation to the Foundation for the Mid South and Southern Development

Bancorporation to develop plans for a major, multi-year strategy – building on each others’ strengths.

In 2004, the planning grant that was received from the Walton Family Foundation resulted in the implementation of a Communities of Opportunity Initiative in the two planning sites. It is our goal to combine the involvement and leadership of grassroots communities and sectors in the Delta with the resources, ideas, and innovation that will come from the Walton funds as well as many other present and potential partners for this comprehensive change model.

Accomplishments during 2005 included the following:

- **Established County Councils**
A series of meetings were held with a diverse group of residents in each COO geographic site to give them the opportunity to determine the composition, process for the selection of COO council members, and membership for each of the four committees - community development; economic development; education; and leadership.
- **Developed Comprehensive Community Plans**
Based on the information from the surveys and focus group meetings, residents in Leflore County and St. Francis County Communities of Opportunity developed a Comprehensive Community Plan (2005-2010). President George Penick and Vice President/Director of the Communities of Opportunity Beverly Divers-White presented this plan to the Walton Family Foundation in May 2005.
- **Hired Residents from Each County to Serve as Liaisons at the Local Level**
Community Liaisons were selected and trained to administer surveys within each incorporated and unincorporated small town in the county and to administer a comprehensive survey for the entire county. In addition, Community Liaisons facilitated focus group meetings throughout each county.
- **Provided Sector Specific Training**

Mid South Delta Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)

A contract to LISC in the amount of \$196,000 was used to provide an organizational assessment, training, technical assistance, and networking opportunities for community development corporations in each geographic site.

In addition to the support provided by LISC, the COO staff funded the participation of the community development corporations in a regional conference sponsored by the Housing Assistance Council.

Learning 24/7

A cost–share contract with The Delta Bridge Project (Phillips County) was supported with \$67,000 from the Communities of Opportunity for *Snapshot*

Audits in Forrest City and Hughes School Districts in St. Francis Counties. The audits conducted for each classroom in both districts were used to establish a common language and understanding of effective leadership skills and behaviors, effective teaching, and measures of student learning.

Learning 24/7

A cost-share contract with The Delta Bridge Project (Phillips County) was supported with \$70,296 to implement a Summer Learning Institute for administrators in Forrest City and Hughes School Districts. The Institute provided instructional leaders (central office and building) with the tools and strategies to lead the school improvement process. Participants left the Institute with an implementation plan for school improvement and a professional library of books to deepen their understanding of the role of leadership in creating school improvement.

- **Developed a County-Wide Housing Plan for St. Francis County**
Mayors and residents of each incorporated area participated in meetings with the St. Francis County CDC to develop a five-year housing development plan.
- **Established Relationship with New CDCs in Leflore County**
Two new community development corporations - Greenwood Housing Authority and Mid Delta Empowerment Zone - have been included for support of housing and real estate development in Leflore County. These two groups will join Three Rivers CDC and Valley CDC for the work in the county.
- **Provided Grants for each Community of Opportunity**

St. Francis County CDC - A grant in the amount of \$150,000 was used as a leverage to support a 15-unit affordable housing development, with a total project cost of \$2,448,000. The development will be constructed in Forrest City for Phase I of the five-year plan.

Valley CDC - A grant in the amount of \$213,500 to support the construction of a 14-unit rental complex for low-wealth residents in Itta Bena, Mississippi will complete the project cost of \$854,000.

Hughes School District - A grant in the amount of \$102,416 was awarded to the school district. Of the total amount, \$51,632 was used to support the ongoing implementation of Learning 24/7, a systemic approach to school improvement. A sum of \$50,784 was used to support a Classroom Library Program at the high school. Training was provided to each teacher to identify effective instructional and motivational strategies for improving the reading skills of high school students.

Awarded \$85,000 in Mini-Grants in Leflore County

Morgan City (\$45,000) - The Morgan City Cultural Enrichment/Recreation Project will create an academic environment for youth to promote learning and academic excellence and will improve the health and lifestyle of community residents through health and physical wellness education.

Three Rivers CDC for the Browning Community (\$20,000) - The Browning residents will renovate and expand current park facilities to provide physical and recreational activities in order to promote a healthy lifestyle for youth and adults.

Quito (\$20,000) - The Quito project goal is to drastically reduce the mosquito infestation throughout the community and eliminate unhealthy environments where the mosquitoes breed and thrive.

- **Received \$95,000 in Mini-Grant Funds for St. Francis County**

Madison Street and Drainage Project - The project goal is to install a drainage system that will reduce safety hazards during peak raining seasons and reduce flood damage to streets, parking lots, buildings, and residents' vehicles.

Wheatley Street Repair Project - The project goal is to enhance citizen safety and extend street life by widening and repairing major city streets throughout Wheatley.

Widener Street/Road Improvement Project -The project goal is to increase the potential for single family housing unit development, for low to moderate-income residents, through the improvement/repair of city streets adjacent to development sites.

Hughes Beautification, Health, and Fitness Project - The project goals are to engage citizens in city beautification efforts to build positive relationships and foster a sense of community pride; and to improve the quality of life for residents by implementing a structured wellness and fitness program, free to all residents.

Palestine Summer Ball Team Project - The project goal is to mobilize the community to promote health, discipline, teamwork, competition, and self-confidence among adolescence and youth and to decrease youth crimes, by providing opportunities for structured participation in community baseball leagues (an opportunity that is not currently available to the youth of community).

- **Implemented a Documentation Process**

A consultant from Delta State University was contracted to assist the Foundation for the Mid South in documenting the Communities of Opportunity Initiative

through an applied research model. The documentation assesses the processes and outcomes of the Initiative using participatory and action oriented methods.

- **Convened the COO Advisory Committee**
The COO Advisory Committee includes national, regional community development leaders, and citizens from the Communities of Opportunity sites. The Spring COO Advisory Committee meeting was held in Leflore County and included dialogue with fifteen Leflore County community leaders and residents. Through a facilitated process, residents and advisory committee members made recommendations to the COO staff for strategies to be implemented as the community change model continues to evolve. These recommendations are being incorporated in the COO 2006 implementation plan.

Plans for 2006 - The activities listed below are planned for 2006:

- **Establish Marketing and Communication Strategies for COO Counties**
Through collaboration with the County Councils in each geographic site, a marketing and communications strategy will be established to update local citizens, partners, and donors on the work and successes of the County Council as the community change evolves.
- **Develop a COO AmeriCorps*VISTA Project** (initial strategy for local staff development)
Six AmeriCorps*VISTA volunteers, three in each COO site, will be recruited to work collaboratively with priority area projects in each county. The County Council, partner organization representative(s), and the COO staff will establish job descriptions and schedules for workers.
- **Provide Organizational Capacity Building Support to Community Development Corporations in COO Counties.**
LISC will continue to build the capacity of COO community development corporations throughout 2006.
- **Provide Funding Opportunities for Priority Area Community Grants that Fulfill the Goals of each County's Strategic Plan.**
- **Provide Specialized Leadership Development Activities to Support Human Capacity Building for Community Change.**
 - Develop new and emerging leaders (18-35 years of age) for future generations through LeadershipPlenty®/Civic Engagement training for community change.
 - Enhance the leadership skills of Certified LeadershipPlenty® Trainers, Community Liaisons, and County Council members through a review of the LeadershipPlenty® curriculum and a strategic plan for implementing best practices for Civic Engagement.

- Provide opportunities for facilitated dialogue, by Study Circles Resource Center staff, on issues of racism, race relations, and other public problems and demonstrate how this process can help citizens answer questions and work together to create positive community change.
 - Build the capacity of County Councils through training in Nonprofit Organization Development, Board Development and Governance, Building Strategic Alliances, etc.
- **Provide Learning Visit Site Opportunities to a Cadre of County Council and Partner Organization Representatives to Visit Regional and National Community Building Models**
 - **Provide opportunities for community stakeholders to convene special assemblies to review and introduce new and innovative community change projects**
 - **COO Data Collection and Analysis**
The Center for Community & Economic Development at Delta State University has been contracted to document the history and progress of the Communities of Opportunity initiative. Additionally they will assist in collecting data for the Success Measures program
 - **Implement Success Measures**
This program is designed to build capacity among community-based organizations to use participatory outcome measurement for program improvement, demonstrating results, and using those demonstrated results to leverage resources on multiple levels.

Metrics - Benchmark data have been established for each major component of the COO initiative. To be most effective, outcome evaluation must be a way of measuring success for each County Council and the Communities of Opportunity staff. Success Measures training is based on peer learning, it supports future networking and support among participants. Ultimately, Success Measures can be used to quantifiably demonstrate the impact that an organizations activities have on individuals, families, and communities and to share this information with stakeholders and funders. This information can be used to inform planning, program improvements, strategic investments and more.