

Center for Economic Options

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Organization and Program Activities June 2006 – June 2007

The Center for Economic Options (CEO) is an independent non profit organization in West Virginia that develops and implements strategies that support sustainable, locally-owned and operated small businesses. CEO works with entrepreneurs and innovators who share a commitment to creating an economy that preserves community character and vitality, promotes economic justice, and protects ecological health and diversity. We primarily serve rural small scale manufacturers, specialty farmers, and artisans and have a long and successful history of related rural enterprise development.

Enterprise Program

Showcase West Virginia: CEO's enterprise program focused on the continued development of this social purpose enterprise which features locally-made products. The program accessed markets, generated revenue and provided market-related services to nearly 200 small business owners from across the state. Clients gained valuable education and experience in preparing to reach various market segments – retail, wholesale, ecommerce, catalogue, and incentives. Our staff provided market-related technical assistance, product consultations, referrals, as well as customer feedback to clients.

During this period, Showcase West Virginia generated \$168,600 with approximately \$84,300 as income to our clients. A recent survey indicated that our clients, on average, receive an annual financial benefit of \$7,562 that they attribute directly to their involvement with Showcase West Virginia. This may not sound significant, but currently the median income of West Virginia is \$32,100 – or 67% of the national median income of \$47,900. Income from Showcase West Virginia raises this to 82% of the national average. In addition to direct sales, our clients report significant income from sales that occur as other gift and retail store owners use Showcase West Virginia to source products, and contact our clients directly to place wholesale orders. Occasionally, retail customers will contact our clients directly to get “better deals” or to request custom orders. Although these activities do not generate income for CEO, they are in line with the organization's mission and contribute positively to the social-enterprises' economic impact.

Showcase West Virginia, with its focus on items made by local businesses and its role as a social enterprise, was featured in numerous newspaper articles and television news stories. CEO and our Showcase program were highlighted in the 2007 Microenterprise in Appalachia, Rural Policy & Entrepreneurship Calendar (Month of April) published by Renewing the Countryside. The calendar was widely distributed in West Virginia and across the region, helping to open new

doors, and create awareness and support, for creative initiatives to support small business in local economies.

The Open-Ended Gallery at Showcase West Virginia: Through the summer of 2006, CEO converted the mezzanine level of Showcase West Virginia to a gallery sales area. This expansion enabled the introduction of new products, attracted new/additional customers and increased sales. The gallery's first exhibit was the Cabin Creek's Women's Photo Voice Project - a photography and essay exhibit that featured works by local residents of their broad community. The grand opening was held in November and featured a public reception with the women who took the photos and wrote stories about their lives in the Cabin Creek former coal-mining community.

The sales gallery continued to feature themed exhibits that tied customers more closely to the artists and artisans who create the one-of-a-kind or limited edition products.

Showcase West Virginia E-Commerce: www.showcasewv.com: CEO launched the Showcase West Virginia ecommerce site during the 2006 holiday season. To date there has been very little marketing and on-line sales have not yet been robust, (\$641.00 since November, 2006). However, customers are contacting and coming into the store as a result of viewing products on-line. Also, clients report being contacted by retail and wholesale buyers as a result of their products being on the Showcase West Virginia website.

MicroMentor:

CEO was one of twelve non-profit organizations across eight states selected by the Washington D.C. - based Aspen Institute for the FIELD MicroMentor initiative. MicroMentor was designed to help enhance the capacity of development agencies across the U.S. to support growth-oriented clients by connecting them with highly skilled volunteer mentors, using the Internet. Through this service, CEO will enable up to 15 of West Virginia's small business owners, known as protégés, to receive a range of mentoring services with estimated value of \$13,500 to \$22,500.

CEO was also approved as a protégé (the only non-profit selected) and received mentor services for its social enterprise activities. The mentoring services are designed for entrepreneurs who are ready for a mentoring relationship. They were matched with a seasoned business professional with experience in their industry or in the particular functional issue that they face (marketing, management, branding, technology, etc.).

CEO was able to receive valuable advice and serve ten additional businesses through MicroMentor. Follow-up with these businesses is planned for fall, 2007.

Collaborations

Sustainable Development Collaboration: CEO, Appalachia Sustainable Development (ASD) and Mountain Association for Community and Economic Development (MACED) are participating in a collaboration to explore organizational sustainability through trust relationships and social purpose enterprise activities. Initial funding has been provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. As a result of this work, CEO is now developing the Green Business Network which will focus on a supply and demand system for a "green" industry sector network.

Social Enterprise Fund Convening: CEO and our SDC profit partners -MACED and ASD – were invited to participate in a convening for funders in the region that was hosted by the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation. Held in Washington D.C. the two-day event brought together nearly 10 foundations and government entities to discuss the importance of social enterprise development and the need for investment to support and encourage existing and potential initiatives. CEO, MACED, and ASD provided specific information on our enterprise models and offered experience, insight, and our visions to the discussion process. This event was a direct result of the collaboration’s influence with the conveners regarding the need to develop and explore alternative and sustainable sources of funding support for social enterprise in local economies.

“Made Right Here” Conference in partnership with the Discover the Real West Virginia Foundation and Senator Jay Rockefeller: CEO plans to co-sponsor a conference in 2008 that will focus on local enterprise, potentially “green” businesses. This will be a follow-up to the successful “Made Right Here” Summit on Small Scale Manufacturing held in 2004. Board member Sara Dearing, director of the Discover the Real West Virginia Foundation, Marilyn Harrell and Pam Curry participated in the preliminary planning meeting with Marshall University representatives who are interested in helping to develop the event. Additional planning will be conducted through the fall of 2007.

Advantage Valley Entrepreneur Development System Collaboration: CEO participates in this collaboration which is one of only six projects nationally funded through a special initiative of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The collaboration is now in the second of three year funding totaling \$2 million. Collaborative members also include the lead agency – Advantage Valley and its Entrepreneur League System – along with A Vision Shared, WV Department of Education, WV Small Business Development System, Charleston Area Alliance, WV Community College Alliance and the Kentucky Innovation Center. CEO is adding marketing awareness and market access as an important component to this system.

A Vision Shared: CEO is a member of the Entrepreneurial Committee of the state’s strategic plan and has played a major role in insuring that support for local enterprise – particularly small-scale and sustainable – is included in recommendations and actions.

- **Market Access Committee**

CEO’s Director is co-chair of this committee which is spearheading a “West Virginia Made” campaign to raise awareness and support for locally owned and operated businesses.

- **Sustainable Development Team**

CEO’s Director was recently selected as a team member and is working with the group on an alternative approach that is focusing on environmentally sustainable business and economic development. She is playing a lead role in developing a white paper on sustainable development.

Central Appalachian Network: CEO is a founding member of this 10+ year old network which connects seven non profit organizations working on developing sustainable local economies. The CAN network includes: CEO and Natural Capital Investment Fund in West Virginia; Appalachian Sustainable Development in Southwestern Virginia; Mountain Association for Community and Economic Development in Kentucky; Appalachian Center for Economic Networks and Rural Action

in Ohio; and the Jubilee Project in Tennessee. CAN is working on a fundraising strategy that will begin with the Ford Foundation. Movement is underway to garner support from a pool of national funders for an \$11 million, five-year initiative focusing on socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable rural enterprise.

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