

BENEDUM COMMUNITY MINI-GRANTS PROGRAM

West Virginia Counties

The Benedum Community Mini-grants Program is designed to enable residents of West Virginia to implement locally-controlled community development on an increasing scale. Close to 2,000 residents in 30 West Virginia counties have participated in skill-building workshops, and over 600 community-based projects have been supported.

History

Benedum Community Mini-grants began in 1990 in McDowell County, the poorest county in West Virginia, in the heart of the coalfields. Caroline Carpenter of the Benedum Foundation had received a proposal from a non-incorporated town in McDowell for \$500 to convert a trash dump into a playground—the kind of grant that foundations do not make, but that most communities obviously needed. (Benedum is a Pittsburgh-based foundation that makes grants only in West Virginia and southwestern Pennsylvania.)

Carpenter had read about peer group microenterprise lending strategies for individuals, and thought, “Why not do this with community based organizations? Set up a structure to let them make their own peer review decisions about use of funds for community development projects, without a formal intermediary.” Carpenter contacted the local economic development authority, staffed by Addie Davis who was “born and raised in McDowell County and very community oriented.” Carpenter comments, “We probably couldn’t have done it with a traditional economic development authority.” A pilot program was developed with a \$25,000 initial grant providing \$5,000 for a series of training workshops and a pool of funds for mini-grants of \$500-\$2,000.

The Benedum Community Mini-grants process

The mini-grant process initiated in McDowell County has been continually refined, based on the experiences of the participants. The process involves forming and training community based

groups to facilitate small-scale local community development projects. The initial organizing and skill building occurs in two phases, after which a group may continue to apply for mini-grants of up to \$2,000 to accomplish specific projects.

The project spreads through word of mouth. Local residents contact Benedum when they think their community is ready to participate. The geographical area, the local steering committee, and the specific projects are always self-selected.

The first phase of the Benedum Community Mini-grants process involves the

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development of a core group of up to 40-50 people. This group meets with Benedum staff and with other West Virginia residents who have participated in the process. Following this introduction, the core group of 40 chooses its own steering committee and a fiscal agent to apply for the Phase I grant. The Foundation trustees, after reviewing the application, typically, allocate \$3,500 to support a series of three workshops on community economic development. The funding covers logistics, food and facilitators.

The second phase begins with five workshops. Training covers specific skills in developing proposals, grant writing, budgeting, conflict resolution and building the organization. Benedum has three stipulations at this point—the only requirements the Foundation imposes:

- 1) The same three people from a community-based project must attend at least four of the five sessions to be eligible for a mini-grant.
- 2) The group and the project must be community-based.

- 3) The project must be achievable in six months.

Each community based organization chooses one representative to sit on the grants committee. The committee reviews proposals and conducts site visits to monitor the project. Each community group decides what project it wants to do, based on the priorities in that geographic area.

Playgrounds, rag rugs, planting trees

Some groups have focused on youth opportunities, such as fixing up a playground or establishing a summer science camp. One local group set up a conflict resolution program and, over the course of a year, trained all of the third- and fourth-graders in the county in conflict resolution.

A group in the TriCounty Partnership area started a project called “The Common Thread,” a non-profit business that makes rag rugs. The project began because the group wanted to establish a scholarship fund, and decided to start a business doing something indigenous to the area to raise money. The Common Thread used its mini-grant to set up looms in a public space; community members can drop by whenever they are available to put in a few hours of work on the rugs. Carpenter notes that many of the projects allow for similarly broad community participation.

The TriCounty committee, with 270 people participating in the training sessions, has completed 54 mini-grant projects. One mini-grant purchased curtains for a stage at a local church, so a community theater group could produce plays in a very rural area. The first three productions were each attended by 300-400 people who had never had access to theater.

Carpenter sees that there is an environmental aspect of many Benedum Community Mini-grants projects simply because they seek to replace the unsustainable mining and resource extraction that has devastated many of these communities both environmentally and economically. Some projects have a more overt environmental focus, such as recycling. One project in Elkins, a county seat, planted trees on Main Street. “Because of the group process, people from throughout the county say they have a sense of pride and ownership of those trees, because they helped get them there,” Carpenter notes.

Building skills and moving beyond mini-grants

Skill building is essential to the project

and is what makes it sustainable, even if Benedum Foundation funding were to end. Carpenter talks about a group in Kimball in McDowell County: the community wanted a new fire engine, costing about \$100,000. When told that was not within the scope of the mini-grant program, they built a playground. Through the mini-grant process, however, “they learned that they could get together and fund raise—then on their own, within six months, they went out and raised the \$100,000 for the fire engine.”

The skills learned by participants in the McDowell County group (called “McAction”) have enabled the group to do many new projects over the years, while participants have also moved on to serve on boards of other organizations within the community and to work with local government agencies. The committee in Randolph County went further, deciding to establish itself as a permanent development organization and incorporating as the Mountain Partners in Community Development, now funded by the Benedum and Kellogg foundations.

Carpenter cautions that the process is extremely labor and time intensive. A particularly important aspect is the development of facilitators; initially, some were too directive and “wanted to tell communities what to do.” Working with the Benedum staff, the West Virginia Center for Economic Options now monitors and assists facilitators to help people develop their own skills and organizations.

Creative and effective grantmaking

In 1993, Caroline Carpenter received the Robert W. Scrivner Award for “creative and effective grantmaking” from the National Council on Foundations in recognition of the Benedum Community Mini-grants Program. Carpenter stresses that beyond the three stipulations from the Foundation, the entire process is controlled by community members, not by the funder’s demands. Carpenter notes that the process “is based upon the culture of capacity and builds relationships, norms and trust. It helps people claim their responsibilities and shape their own ideas. The success is created by local community residents and provides them the

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Scope: Statewide
Inception Date: 1991
Participants: Foundation, community groups, residents
Project type: Comprehensive community development, community economic development
Methods used: Locally-controlled mini-grants, community organizing
Lessons learned: Process is as important as product. Broad based participation leads to greater commitment.

ability to go forward as they see fit.” A Lincoln County Steering Committee member echoes: “Emphasize that it is the community that is in charge. . . . Community people are doing this and we want to do it right.”

—*Jobs & Environment Campaign*



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The Benedum Community Mini-Grants program continues to be very active. At the present time, 28 counties in West Virginia have completed both Phase I and Phase II training. The counties are located in rural areas throughout the state. In addition to the counties completing their training, two counties are now in Phase I. Inquiries have been received from three

additional counties about the possibilities for participating in the program. Thus far, more than 2,000 people have completed training in the mini-grants program.

One goal of the program has been to serve as a catalyst, promoting expanding community participation and giving. In one example, Morgan County was awarded a total of \$77,912 in mini-grants for 39 projects. However, with the addition of donated funds and donated labor and materials from businesses, organizations, and individuals in the community, the total amount available for these projects reached \$173,717.

The Benedum Mini-Grant projects continue to be very innovative. Specific projects include: establishing a local history room in an historic building; constructing a community walking track; purchasing computers, copiers and video equipment for a variety of groups, including senior citizens and a Boys and Girls Club; obtaining books on animals for children for use in a local library; buying equipment for a beauty parlor at a senior citizen’s home; and improving playground facilities at a local park and day care center.

The Benedum Community Mini-Grants program has also had broader impacts. Spin-off projects include a Community Development Corporation and a community wellness center. In more general terms, one community reported that the program has resulted in boosting the self-esteem of community members, giving them a feeling that “We can” instead of “We can’t” with regard to other community improvement efforts.

Work is currently underway on a publication, which will profile the experience in three or four counties, including outcomes beyond those associated with this specific program. At least one of the county programs is also preparing its own publication.

Current challenges are expanding the program to include additional counties in the state, maintaining the quality of mini-grant projects, and encouraging people to continue their training and tackle larger community development projects.

—*Community Sustainability Resource Institute*