



SEA ISLANDS COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM

February 2012

Introduction to Need

This initiative begins with the maxim that education is the key to opportunity. Education is the bedrock foundation on which the rest of life's endeavors are built; it is learning "the how's and what's" in order to improve one's quality of life, and when an individual's education is compromised, the society as a whole bears the resulting economic, environmental, and social burden.

The Sea Islands region has great strengths and opportunities for educational success. It is home to an active, diverse, and concerned population, both locals born and raised in the region as well as a large population of retirees relocated from across the country. It is steeped in a history of strong advocacy, from the early and ongoing efforts of the Penn Center on St. Helena Island, to the historical response to the needs of under-served groups through the Mather School (now Technical College of the Lowcountry), to the recent initiatives supported by the Sheldon Township Community Support Partnership. It has a choice of educational structures at the childhood as well as adult level, abundant library resources, and a wealth of current and former professional educators within the community. However, the Sea Islands are also home to many resource-challenged subset communities, often rural and with a substantial educational achievement gap from their counterparts in the region. These groups, predominantly African American though not exclusively, are under-represented and under-served by the strengths and opportunities for educational success that the region otherwise provides. They suffer from de-facto exclusion, governmental reticence, lack of inertia, and systematic lethargy.

The results can be seen in the demographic data of the region. For example, the US Census lists the household poverty level in Sheldon at 34%, strikingly high as compared with 22% on St. Helena Island, 14% on Port Royal Island, 11% in the Bluffton area, only 8% on Hilton Head Island, and a mere 6% on Lady's Island. Similar statistics can be documented for unemployment, illiteracy, high school drop-out rate, etc. Collectively, this data repeatedly reinforces the reality that, while some groups of our citizens are being well-served by the institutions and opportunities of our region, other groups are simply being left behind, and with devastating results for entire subset communities.

It is undeniable that the limits to achievement of some citizens of our region necessarily diminish the well-being of our region as a whole. MacArthur-winning activist Majorca Carter has said: "From a planning perspective, economic degradation begets environmental degradation, which begets social degradation." Sea Islands 2050 sees the opportunity for achievement of all its citizens as a foundational step towards the fight against the economic, and therefore environmental and social, degradation of our community. Put simply, we see the opportunity for individual achievement as central to the sustainability of our region.

The Sea Islands Community Empowerment Program is developed to improve the opportunity for all of the region's citizens to gain access to, take advantage of, and see benefit from a life-long opportunity for advancement of individual achievement. Through improved educational resource access, the resulting individual and community-level economic expansion, and the community development that will result, the Community Empowerment initiative offers impact to the educational, economic, and social well-being of the targeted populations, and as a result, the Sea Islands region as a whole.

Goals and Objectives

The mission of the Sea Islands Community Empowerment Program is to ensure provision for the educational success of citizens young and old, first those in Sheldon Township and eventually those in similarly underserved communities throughout greater Beaufort County and the Sea Islands region, now and into the future.

The program's main goals are to implement ongoing assessment and evaluation systems, employ continuous education and mentoring opportunities, and utilize training curricula and programs that will monitor achievement potential, build education and skill level, and provide ongoing access to life-long learning for those subset communities in need of support in overcoming the achievement struggles of their citizens.

Focusing on potential outcomes, the specific objectives of the initiative's efforts include:

- A rise in the education level of the program participants
- A rise in the literacy rate of the adults of the underserved community
- A rise in the median household income of the underserved community
- A reduction in the unemployment level of the underserved community

Target Population

The Community Empowerment project will initially target the population of Sheldon Township. This community, in the northern-most quadrant of Beaufort County, has a substantially higher percentage of African Americans (74.8%) as compared to the county overall (19.3%). Sheldon Township has a median household income (\$28,338) significantly below the averages of both the county (\$55,286) and state (\$43,939), has a high school graduate level (69.3%) significantly below the averages of both the county (90.6%) and the state (83.0%), and has a bachelor degree or higher educational level (11.6%) significantly below the averages of both the county (37.4%) and the state (24.0%).¹

Considering these factors, it is clear that this subset community of Beaufort County is achieving, by broad markers, on a level substantially and systematically below that of its surrounding communities. Coupled with its level of need, the cooperation from influential groups within the community and the willingness of citizen participation leads Sea Islands 2050 to identify Sheldon Township as an initial target population for the Community Empowerment initiative.

¹ <http://www.city-data.com/> and <http://quickfacts.census.gov>



In subsequent phases, the Community Empowerment project will seek out additional communities achieving similarly below that of their surrounding communities, initially within Beaufort County and subsequently within the surrounding region. Through ongoing research of the greater Sea Islands community, the project will seek to identify all resource-challenged subset communities within our region that are in need of similar strategies for improved achievement opportunity, collaborating with those communities in implementing Community Empowerment project strategies where individually relevant.

Project Strategies

The Sea Islands Community Empowerment Program will be facilitated through an Institute of Continuing Education (ICE), located within the served community for maximum accessibility to all community members. The Institute may be formally tied to parallel Institutes of Continuing Education developed by the Community Empowerment project in neighboring communities of need and/or to existing educational institutions, as is advantageous to the facilitation of the program.

The goal of each branch of the ICE will be provision of: Monitoring through educational assessment and evaluation programs; and Intervention through remediation, retraining and skills improvement educational programs. The Institute may develop partnership(s) with existing community groups and/or utilize resources (such as facilities, equipment, instructors, etc.) of existing community organizations and institutions, as is advantageous to the facilitation of the program.

The Institute will provide specific services to the served community, including:

- Services to assess educational, employability, and trainability levels (including adult education, diploma, GED, Literacy, Proficiency, and WorkKeys)
- Services to assist in eliminating the educational achievement gap (including classes, trainings and apprenticeships, and workshops)
- Services to assist in matching education, skills, and training to meaningful work (including mentoring, regional employment needs, workforce monitoring, and business ownership)

Provision of these services by the Institute of Continuing Education will be broken into 3 phased projects. Project 1 will include meetings, testing and workshops to assess and evaluate educational

levels and deficiencies of community members. Project 2 will include classes and workshops developing and implementing curricula and programs to eliminate the education and skills gap within the community. Project 3 will include identifying/establishing mentoring and support groups, job matching and referral agencies, and a tracking system for community members.

ICE classes and workshops on education gap remediation have been conceptually designed by the Project Team. Development sessions will include community members, educators, business persons and government officials determining need within the served community. The resulting classes and workshops will give opportunity to work with educators, counselors and mentors to meaningfully increase education, skill level, and employability, with the goal of eliminating the education gap within the served community and growing the employment/business ownership level of community members.

Chief Participants

The Sea Islands 2050 Fellows chairing the Community Empowerment project are:

- Fred Leyda, Director of Beaufort County Human Services
- Chief Olofundeyi Olaitan, Director of Outreach Development at African Theological Archministry
- Kim Statler, Executive Director of Lowcountry Economic Alliance

Additionally, participation by Sea Islands 2050 staff will be necessary for coordination of some project activities, and expert consultants will be sought, in collaboration with local institutions, to implement project activities at the institutional level. Sea Islands 2050 will also collaborate with parallel initiatives throughout the region as the project expands beyond the initial phase, seeking to coordinate a unified approach to the achievement struggles within our greater Sea Islands community.

Measurement of Results

The ultimate goal of the Sea Islands Community Empowerment Program will be to eliminate the education and achievement gap between subset communities and their surrounding region, measured by increased high school diplomas, increased GED acquisition for high school drop-outs, WorkKey certification, college degrees, skill improvement, meaningful employment and/or business ownership.

In addition, meaningful progress in the identified project objectives will help define the ongoing success of the initiative's community empowerment model and its implementation strategies:

- Measurable increase in the education level of the program participants, over a 5 year period
- Measurable increase in the literacy rate of the adults of the community, over a 5 year period
- Measurable increase in the median household income of the community, over a 5 year period
- Measurable reduction in the unemployment level of the community, over a 5 year period

Furthermore, the development of the Institute of Continuing Education will solidify the availability of this model to the served community well into the future, so that not only the current generation has opportunity to improve their achievement potential, but future generations will continue to have similar opportunities in the future.