

CEDA: Celebrating 40 Years of Building Community Partnerships to Improve Lives

By Mary Jo Cannistra

Introduction

After President Lyndon Johnson declared an “unconditional war on poverty”¹ in 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act² was drafted, and numerous organizations quickly formed to wage battle in communities around the country. The Community and Economic Development Association of Cook County, Inc. (CEDA)³ was one such group. Established in 1966, CEDA began at the grassroots level – in schools, churches, storefronts, and community centers. It is now one of the largest private nonprofit organizations in the U.S., with over 200 offices throughout Cook County. With a staff of 700, over 4,500 volunteers, and more than 40 programs, it serves 230,000 clients per year with a budget of over \$100 million.

CEDA is a development organization that seeks out current research and follows demographic trends. Its

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**Robert L. Wharton,
President/CEO, CEDA**

structure allows flexibility to adapt to constantly changing needs in its target communities. Most community-based solutions to poverty-related issues involve layers of support systems, collaboration, and teamwork. CEDA has built a network of services, which are provided in part by four subsidiary corporations: Community Nutrition Network, Senior Services Association, CEDA Community Development Fund, and the Economic Development Association.

CEDA provides programs and services in child and family development, health and nutrition, financial and

economic development, emergency services, energy conservation, employment and job training, housing, and education, as well as senior-oriented programs. According to Robert L. Wharton, CEDA President/CEO, CEDA is “helping to reduce poverty and improve the quality of life among individuals, families, and communities throughout Chicago and its suburbs. CEDA is building partnerships in the community to help achieve our mission.”

Celebrating 40 Years of Helping Cook County Residents

During the week of September 25-28, 2006, CEDA celebrated 40 years of serving its community with a county-proclaimed “CEDA Week,” sponsored by Harris Bank and Washington Mutual. The week began with a press conference during which the State of Illinois announced that CEDA will receive a portion of a \$1 million federal grant to reduce home energy service disconnections. Illinois is one of four states that will receive the Residential Energy Assistance Challenge Option Program (REACH)⁴ grant in 2006. REACH will target Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)⁵ beneficiaries, those at highest risk of losing service as a result (in part) of recent utility cost increases.

CEDA also provided a bus tour to several of its offices for its supporters and others to learn first hand of the group's local impact. Among the stops on the tour was a ‘weatherization’ demonstration in a home on the near west side of Chicago. The CEDA Weatherization Program⁶ is the largest of its kind in the U.S. The program has served 4,200 home owners in suburban Cook County and the city of Chicago. The program provides resources to qualified Cook County residents to improve home safety and energy efficiency. Persons with disabilities, the elderly, and families with children under five years of age receive priority.

The tour also included the Oak Lawn Women, Infants & Children (WIC)⁷ facility. Margaret Saunders, CEDA WIC Director, stated, “Healthy children have the best opportunities to succeed and to become self-sufficient.” WIC is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and is a supplemental nutrition program whose focus is on healthy diets for mothers and children. The program provides nutrition education and counseling, breast-feeding support, nutritious foods, and referrals to other services. As the second largest WIC program in Cook County, CEDA serves over 32,000 clients monthly in their 17 Chicago area clinics.

CEDA’s Revolving Loan Program provides low-interest loans to establish or grow small businesses that create jobs.

Finally, the group visited the Dudley Beauty School of Illinois, a borrower under CEDA’s Small Business Loan Program.⁸ CEDA serves as a liaison between local governments and loan recipients to promote business development. CEDA also works with local bankers and loan applicants

looking to create jobs and provide growth opportunities for their employees. Of particular interest to CEDA are businesses located in areas of high unemployment, and women- and minority-owned businesses with the potential to create jobs. With CEDA’s help, founders Joe and Eunice Dudley turned a dilapidated police station into a successful business and job training center.

Overview of CEDA Lending Programs

CEDA’s Revolving Loan Program provides low-interest loans to establish or grow small businesses that create jobs. Typical uses of the loan funds include working capital needs and expansion. Three loan programs are offered for business expansion or capital improvements – two are offered by CEDA, and the third is offered by the Community Development Fund (CDF), a CEDA affiliate that provides capital, economic development services, financial literacy, and technical assistance to small businesses in suburban Cook County and the City of Chicago.⁹

Since 1983, CEDA has made \$9.3 million in low-interest loans to small businesses through the Revolving Loan Fund, leveraging \$70 million from private sources, and creating 950 new jobs. For every \$20,000 in assistance that CEDA provides, a new job must be created, which a low-income resident of Chicago or South Suburban Cook County must fill.

CEDA Head Start Programs

Early Head Start and Head Start¹⁰ are comprehensive child and family development programs designed to build fundamental learning skills required to succeed in school, as well as social skills. Through 30 centers in suburban Cook County, CEDA Head Start currently serves 2,877 pre-school children and their families. Parents can also enroll their children in the Half-Day School Year or Before/After School programs.

Teen Parent Services (TPS)¹¹ is a state-funded program focused on helping pregnant teens and teen parents stay in school or return to school to earn their high school diploma or GED equivalent. TPS assists eligible participants with the costs of books, childcare, transportation, GED classes, uniforms, and other school-related expenses. In addition, this program provides family case management and information regarding childcare, medical care, immunizations, housing, domestic violence, and literacy programs.

In 2003, CEDA surveyed residents of Robbins and Ford Heights, Illinois, and found that availability of ATMs was their highest priority financial services need.¹² In response, CEDA placed the first ATMs in these communities. By placing the ATMs in police stations, the goal was for users to feel safe when using the ATM. Recently, the Ford Heights model was replicated by Wisconsin law enforcement. In addition, community development projects have stemmed from this initiative, providing new businesses and jobs for the community.

The ATM initiative has led to stronger support by financial institutions—institutions that are key in filling the financial

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void in impoverished regions within Cook County. CEDA realizes that certain financial and program initiatives are better suited for specific areas, and they continue to research and fill these niches.

In December 2006, CEDA Northwest Self-Help Center, Inc., opened a resale shop in Des Plaines, Illinois. With 4,000 square feet of retail space, this shop sells gently used merchandise such as apparel, accessories, furniture, housewares, linens, and toys. The shop’s revenue provides additional funding to help CEDA carry out its mission.

Looking Toward the Future

CEDA's visibility within the community is the key to its success. It has thus strategically established eight Community Development Agencies (CDAs) to serve as its hubs for community networking and outreach. CEDA's CDAs are currently working with community members and businesses to identify strategic locations for community development ventures, such as strip malls and truck stops.

Undeniably, poverty has spread from Chicago to the inner suburbs. Gentrification and immigration displaces the poor from some city neighborhoods. Dispersal of Chicago Housing Authority residents has produced cultural and economic instability. The need for services in a number of CEDA's programs has grown over the years, arising from these and many other trends. Striving to evolve within the community, CEDA hopes to provide additional services and explore more innovative services and technologies over the next four years.

CEDA's current plans include new initiatives in affordable housing, bridging the digital divide, filling human service gaps, economic development ventures, supporting small business expansion, and creating a capital fund in partnership with financial institutions.

According to Wharton, "CEDA, Inc., continues to seek solutions to poverty by consulting members of the community first. We believe that the more people included in the process will allow for a stronger outcome."

CEDA is a member of the National Congress for Community Economic Development, the National Association of Community Action Agencies, the National Community Action Foundation, and the Illinois Community Action Association. Additional information regarding CEDA is available at www.cedaorg.net.

Notes

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