

**Turning the Tide on Poverty Extension Initiative:
Helping Communities in the Rural South Tackle Poverty
Using Deliberative Democracy Strategies**

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Phase II Final Report

Turning the Tide on Poverty Extension Initiative, now entering its third year of operation, has spurred the growth of civic engagement and brought greater attention to the challenging issue of poverty in communities across the South. With nearly 20 sites active in the process, the Southern Rural Development Center has been privileged to witness a number of promising community-based actions to address poverty. What is especially gratifying is the host of local people who have found their voices when regard to weighing in on important community issues. This report seeks to inform the Farm Foundation of the important accomplishments that its two-year investment has helped realize. Specifically, this report delineates:

- Specific activities that have been launched in the target sites as a product of this effort;
- The contribution the effort has made in enhancing citizen-centered engagement in the pilot communities;
- Impact the initiative has had (to date) in terms of Extension's commitment to this approach to strengthening the civic-health of communities in their states.

Phase Two Proposed Strategies:

1. Organize a Summit of Participating States to Identify Lessons Learned: *Completed July 2010 as reported in the third quarter of 2010.*
2. Host a Multi-State Train-the-Trainer Series to Expand the Number of States in the South Prepared to Launch the *Turning the Tide on Poverty Civic Engagement Effort* in the South: *Completed December 2010 as reported in the fourth quarter of 2010.*

Year One Site Accomplishments:

During the late spring and early summer months of 2011, the SRDC research team revisited each of the initial Year One sites to talk with key informants and community members about what Tide has accomplished. The resulting impact stories were then compiled into site reports and posted to the SRDC website. These detailed reports are can be found at: <http://srdc.msstate.edu/tide/results.html>. The following paragraphs are intended to showcase some of these key accomplishments.

Alabama

Dallas County - Renovating an old football field into a community walking trail, turning the old concession stand into a Farmers Market, and forming a Community Development Corporation—what's the common thread? These are all actions that the Selmont community in Dallas County, Ala., has underway as a result of participating in Turning the Tide on Poverty. Working with the Dallas County Strategic Alliance for Health project, committee members have secured funding to renovate the old football field behind Tipton Middle School. The walking trail will literally help people take strides in addressing the county's high obesity and diabetes rates. Additionally, converting the concession stand into a farmers market has brought fresh produce within walking distance to an area where the nearest grocery store is more than five miles away.

Georgia

Elbert County – Elbert County has taught us a lot about the importance of taking time to develop local leadership capacity in order for the process to be successful. Leadership for this type of work cannot happen from the outside in, but rather must come from within the heart of the community. While the State Extension Specialist has been actively working in the county, it has taken more time than anticipated to grow the local capacity. The community simply needs more time to lay the foundation for promoting citizen engagement in an effort such as Tide. The state specialist remains committed to planting the seeds needed to launch Tide at the appropriate time in the county at some point in the future.

Louisiana

St. Landry Parish – One of the most promising Action Ideas launched in St. Landry Parish is a true example of how local citizens can come together in partnership to attack the roots of poverty. This county set a goal of establishing a local community nursery specializing in native plants. Already emerging as a historical tourism site, the county seat of Washington sees this as a perfect match to community assets and opportunities to increase jobs and enhance local revenue. With the support of the city council in place, the Action Team is actively pursuing this initiative.

Tensas Parish - Unique to the first round Tide sites was Tensas Parish's approach to conducting circles with only high school participants. At the same time, Dr. Pamela Monroe (professor at Louisiana State University) was working with the LSU Honors College, composed of various learning communities for undergraduate students, including LASAL: Louisiana Service and Learning. LASAL seeks to understand the unique aspects and challenges of Louisiana and generate creative solutions coupled with commitment to service. One of the two main focus areas for LASAL is poverty, especially in the Delta region. When the LASAL students and faculty heard about Tide during one of Dr. Monroe's lectures, they became interested in partnering with the Tide students as part of their LASAL project. Since that time, the LASAL students have worked with the Tide students on the poverty concerns that they share. While projects

are still taking shape, the mentoring and connections developing between the two groups has already impacted lives in a positive manner.

Mississippi

Lauderdale County – One key to overcoming poverty is through quality education. Working in partnership with the Parents for Public Schools, a non-profit national organization with roots in Mississippi, the Action Team has worked to empower parents to become more effective supporters of their children’s educational pursuits. One of the successful initiatives during the past quarter was the Parent Institute, a series of weekend workshops focusing on educating parents on school policy issues, effective communication with school teachers and administrators, and appropriate advocacy for their children when concerns arise. The Institute culminates with parents designing a project specifically aimed at addressing an area that would help improve education opportunities for their children. For the recently ended spring session, the Institute had to turn parents away because of a lack of space. Much of this was due to the visibility that the Tide Action Team provided to help promote this event. While the projects that emerged from the Institute are not yet reported, we will be eager to hear how the roots of Tide have expanded to additional civic engagement opportunities for these parents.

Neshoba County - In an effort to initiate unification to fight poverty, one of Neshoba’s Action Teams recently completed the Neshoba Community Resource Directory as a collaboration of the town of Philadelphia, Neshoba County and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. Previously, the Choctaw Reservation and the county had separate directories, so this is a great stride toward community unification. Now that the citizens of Neshoba County have an all-inclusive resource guide, they will be able to access the full breadth of services available across the entire community. In addition, community organizations, businesses and schools can better serve their fellow citizens by linking them to needed services. The Community Resource Directory available online at www.neshoba.org.

Oklahoma

Okfuskee County – The small towns of Boley, Clearview, and Weleetka situated in Okfuskee County have surfaced what one community member called “sleeping giants.” These small communities have shown the true heart of Tide by developing a number of meaningful, citizen led initiatives. One such initiative will soon provide wireless broadband access to the community of Clearview through a Wichita OnLine grant. The Town of Boley recently opened a food pantry through the efforts of Tide Action Teams. Weleetka held its inaugural Pride Day this past fall to promote tourism and encourage past residents to return to the community. These communities will truly be worth watching in the coming months as their initial successes continue to foster even bigger opportunities.

Year Two Site Accomplishments:

Arkansas – Pine Bluff, Arkansas has struggled with persistent poverty for many years. Yet now, they are ready to move forward. Tide was launched in that community on September 30, 2011. The Study Circles are underway at this time with plans to have Action Teams identified and busy in the coming New Year.

Florida – Immokalee, Florida, which recently launched Tide with a largely Hispanic audience, is the first of the Southern sites to translate materials (into Spanish) and use translators to walk participants through the process. As one of the first Year Two sites to launch, this community is already actively pursuing a number of initiatives. Samplings of these efforts include:

- Eden Park Action Team understands the link between health outcomes and poverty, which was the driver of their first two initiatives. The first is to build a safe walking path between a local school and the park. This will aid those that lack transportation to have a safe alternative between these important destinations. It will also help to increase exercise in a community that is confronted with a number of health concerns. In addition, a team is exploring opportunities to increase sports programs and other exercise options within the park. The local Lion's Club is offering assistance, exploring a location for a sports complex.
- Grace's Adults with Disabilities Action Team is seeking to identify adults with disabilities and begin to locate resources to help this population. One of the first issues to be addressed will be transportation.
- Farm Workers' Village Action Team has three important goals. First, as noted above, addressing health issues is a priority. In response, the team is planning a series of health workshops to foster better health outcomes. A community garden is also in the planning stages with assistance from the local Extension Service's Master Gardeners Volunteers. Finally, a series of adult education opportunities is planned to help build workforce skills and financial education.

Kentucky & Tennessee – This two-state team's vision was to implement Tide in several impoverished counties in tandem with a HUD economic development grant. However, faced with a number of local issues, such as funding/staffing cuts resulting in reduced on-the-ground support, they have not yet been able to launch to date. Yet, even in this challenging location, the SRDC team has been able to work with the local team to learn from the challenges. One of the take-aways from this site is the importance of having a local, respected "champion" that understands and embraces the process. This is not a process that can be led from afar. A local supporter is essential.

North Carolina – Focusing on Herford County, the initiative kicked off on June 7, 2011. During their Action Forum in August, the community honed in on a single concern related to poverty: literacy. "Read, Lead, Succeed" is their focused response to this concern. The goal of this project is to increase the number of books available to teachers, students, and parents. Many children and their parents lack access to quality reading material. The initiative has as one of its unique goals to target parents along

with the children to increase reading. This approach underscores the importance of parent modeling for the children. The initial objective of the team is to collect 1,000 books by December 2011. These books will be distributed at quarterly workshops and meetings with parents and grandparents to teach strategies to encourage literacy at home.

Virginia – As the first sites to launch Tide in year 2 of the SRDC-coordinated effort, Greensville and Emporia, Virginia established three Action Teams in mid-spring 2011: (1) enhancing opportunities for youth with an emphasis on arts and travel; (2) economic development with a focus on building opportunities to support small business development and workforce training opportunities; and (3) city pride through beautification efforts.

West Virginia – Vista volunteers form a large portion of the facilitators recently trained to help guide community circles. These same volunteers will complete a four-county litter sweep over the next few weeks, which planners believe will help create community excitement. The community held its kick-off event in the fall 2011. It is anticipated that action teams will start by early 2012.

Overall Project Accomplishments:

We offer a list of other important accomplishments realized with the Tide program over the course of the past year:

Tide Discussion Guide Finalized: Based on the excellent input secured from first-year pilot sites, the Turning the Tide on Poverty Discussion Guide was revised, redesigned and printed. This new version is on-line and can be downloaded free.

Funding Received for Research Continuation: To ensure the work of Tide is on track with the goals of increased civic participation, the SRDC has worked with the Kettering Foundation to provide a thorough investigation into whether and how the process changes communities and citizens. During the past quarter, the Kettering Foundation agreed to fund the research project for a second year, allowing the research team to return to the Year One sites for a look at what has changed, as well as launch the research protocol in Year Two sites. This on-going research support better enables the SRDC and its team to make certain the process is making meaningful change within the communities that it touches.

Tide Receives Awards:

- **NACDEP Award:** During the National Association of Community Development Extension Professions (NACDEP) annual meeting, the Year One Tide Team was awarded the Southern Region 2011 NACDEP Team award for Excellence in Community Development Work
- **NEAFCS Award:** During the September 2011 National Association of Extension Family & Consumer Science Conference, Tide was honored with the Mary Wells Memorial Diversity Award for the southern region.

Presentations at National Conferences:

- ***NACDEP Presentation:*** Showcasing both the Extension and Research components of Tide, Tricia Dyk and Rachel Welborn co-presented a 90-minute workshop to highlight the first year of work.
- ***RSS/CDS Presentation:*** Tide was presented at the Rural Sociological Society & Community Development Society Joint Conference in July 2011.
- ***NEAFCS Presentation:*** Tide was showcased in two separate sessions at the National Association of Extension Family & Consumer Science Conference in September 2011. Tide was selected for one session through a proposal process while the second was an invited presentation based on the award received.

Appalachian Regional Commission Project: Hearing of the success of Tide in the two Mississippi pilot sites, an Extension Specialist from Mississippi State University saw an opportunity to expand the reach of this process into other distressed counties that were not currently part of the Tide sites. With the support of the Appalachian Regional Commission, Tide is expanding to four additional counties in Mississippi during 2011-12. An additional element, also funded by ARC, is a project to promote the well-being of children under five. The grant funds and tandem project will provide momentum to these challenged areas in the state.

Entergy Louisiana Adopt a School Zone Initiative: Having heard of the Tide initiative through Year One sites in Louisiana, the leadership team of this Entergy project in the Istrouma High School district have incorporated the project into its multi-faceted approach. The process is just beginning its organization phase with plans to move toward action during the early months of 2012.

International Association of Public Participation Certification: Over the past year, Tide has proven that citizens are ready and willing to actively pursue solutions to tough community problems. However, throughout the year, it was also clear that other approaches besides community circles may, at times, be needed. Thus, seeking to expand the SRDC's knowledge of additional approaches, Rachel Welborn completed a five-day intensive training certification, bringing back a wealth of resources that can be tailored to fit other community needs within the realm of civic engagement. We will take a careful look at how her training can be used to further strengthen the Tide work in the Southern Region.

Contributions to Citizen-Centered Engagement:

As was noted earlier in this report, a companion research process has been put in place as a result of a partnership the SRDC has established with the Kettering Foundation. A part of this process included a pre- and post-survey with community members that attended the initial Kick-Off event and the final Action Forum. While this was a narrow window of time (typically about 8 weeks), changes seen in the responses of individuals are encouraging. Below is a sampling of findings that point to the success of Tide in fostering civic engagement:

- People that attended at least four of the five community circles sessions reported higher levels of community trust than those that participated in three or less sessions.
- 85% of the participants reported a greater sense of confidence in addressing community issues following the Tide process.
- 85% of those that participated in at least four of the five sessions also joined an Action Team, compared to only 43% who attended three or less sessions.

While the SRDC looks forward to continuing to learn about this process through the data collection efforts with Tide Year Two sites, these findings provide initial evidence that the community circles process is a promising approach for promoting community trust, confidence, and action.

Impact on Extension's Commitment to Strengthening Civic Engagement:

Another component of the Kettering research process was to explore the attitudes of Extension administrators and educators related to civic engagement. This investigation took two forms. Prior to the launching of Year One sites, Extension administrators, directors and state program leaders in the target states participated in a focus group session to examine current levels of support related to civic engagement. A year later, as these sites were launching into action, these leaders reconvened to explore the same set of issues. Similarly, the "on the ground" staff responsible for launching Tide completed both pre- and post-surveys.

For both the Extension leadership and local field staff, the level of support for Extension's involvement in promoting civic engagement expanded. For example, during the initial focus group meeting with the Extension leaders, many expressed hesitancy in placing field staff in this type position. One of the chief concerns voiced was the potential "fall-out" of addressing a controversial issue in the community. They feared that since many county level Extension offices were supported, in part, by county funds, surfacing community issues that could have political ramifications could jeopardize their funding. Moreover, some leaders were concerned that field staff would lack the skills needed to guide this type of work, skills that were far different from the traditional "educator" role that Extension educators were asked to typically carry out.

However, one year later, these same leaders shifted their perspectives in a significant way. The comments on the same questions took on very positive tones as these individuals shared the successes that had been realized in the Tide sites in their states. While in the first meeting, the dominant attitude may well have been described as "apprehensive," the second meeting clearly shifted to an attitude of "supportive." In one state, the field staff was honored with the "Customer Outreach Award" for their efforts with Tide. This level support from top Extension leaders represents an encouraging step in strengthening Extension's role in this type of civic choice work.

Support emerged not only among Extension leaders. Field staff expressed increased support for this work as captured in their pre/post survey responses. For instance, half of the respondents indicated a better understanding of the importance of civic engagement. The other half indicated they already understood this importance but that Tide reaffirmed what they already knew. Furthermore, half stated that they would be willing to use the community circle process again to address other community issues. The remaining half stated that their only reservation was the time commitment required in relation to other work demands they had to manage. Almost two-thirds stated they have plans to continue promoting civic engagement initiatives in the coming year, while the remaining respondents said they were unsure or stated they would not, due in large part to the amount of time required to pursue this type of work. Half of them indicated that their administrators had expressed greater support for their civic work, something that could foster increased involvement of Extension educators in this important work.

Taken together, support by the Extension leadership appears to have increased as a product of the Tide experience. Approximately half of the field staff indicated continued investment and commitment to this work given the positive results they saw taking hold in their communities. The chief concern for the remaining field staff seemed to revolve around the challenges of balancing multiple time commitments. It is possible that as support continues to increase on the part of Extension leaders, more field staff will be encouraged to balance their educational outreach activities in ways that will allow them to devote more time to civic choice work.

Closing Comments:

The SRDC is genuinely grateful for the support of the Farm Foundation throughout this initial two-year exploration of civic engagement. As these communities continue to advance through their action goals, the seeds of civic engagement that this partnership has helped plant will continue to flourish and pay dividends in the months ahead.