

# LOUISIANA

## Turning the Tide on Poverty the Creating Vibrant Communities Together

### ST. LANDRY PARISH

**Location:**

South-Central Louisiana

**Population:** 90,983**Estimated median****household income:** \$28,110**Estimated households****below poverty level:** 29.6%**Study Circle Participants:** 15

### TENSAS PARISH

**Location:**

Northeast Louisiana

**Population:** 5,798**Estimated median****household income:** \$30,572**Estimated households****below poverty level:** 25.4%**Study Circle Participants:** 12

*"This is about building community, not just about projects."*

— Washington resident

Turning the Tide On Poverty, a Southern Rural Development Center initiative that seeks to involve a wide range of community members in fighting poverty by utilizing local talents and resources, brought teenagers into leadership roles and spurred civic cooperation in St. Landry and Tensas parishes.

### ST. JOSEPH

#### Young leadership

Tide had an unexpected influence in St. Joseph, parish seat of Tensas Parish, the least populous of Louisiana's 64 parishes. Despite strong attendance by a cross-section of its 1,391 residents during the planning stages, only about a dozen people followed through with the Study Circles, a group of African-American students from Tensas High School.

Led by an adult facilitator, the community-minded students identified local issues and set to work improving their town, where 25 percent of residents live below the poverty line. The teens say Tide helped them realize their leadership potential and taught them important conflict resolution skills.

After hearing of the young Tide group's successes, a poverty-focused learning community in the Louisiana State University Honors College adopted them as their outreach project. The college students joined the St. Joseph high schoolers in building a community garden and on several other occasions as well. As a result of the partnership, two Tide volunteers participated in a summer leadership camp at LSU.



Realizing the need for recreational venues, the St. Joseph group persuaded local law enforcement to repair a basketball court, giving the teenagers a place to play ball, and to install a playground for smaller children to enjoy. They also held a school uniform drive, providing clean, pressed uniforms to families in need. The teens planted flowers at the local elementary school and other areas, cleaned a town garden club gazebo, and collaborated with the Tensas Parish Alliance to install a new local news bulletin board.

These bold young people are learning early the importance of recognizing community problems and working together to make positive changes in their hometown. Surprising leaders have emerged, and St. Joseph is better because of their commitment.

"Adults, including the mayor, have heard us, and they are responding," said one Tide participant. "We are the future leaders of this parish."

## ■ WASHINGTON

### Steamboat City Association

As residents of Washington, a town of only 753 in St. Landry Parish, identified through Tide Study Circles the projects they wished to undertake for their community, they decided to create a local foundation to carry out these goals.

Adopting the Steamboat City Association Articles of Federation this summer marks the first step toward forming this non-profit, tax-exempt corporation. With 38.1 percent of the town's population living in poverty, the new association will pursue charitable, educational and scientific endeavors for the general betterment of Washington and its residents.

Possible projects include designating a cultural district in the town and enhancing its growing tourism, art and antique businesses. The group seeks to involve Washington's young residents by providing cameras for fourth graders to capture their hometown in photographs suitable for a town exhibit. With help from a local mechanic, the Mighty Mowers program would provide local teens with refurbished lawn mowers and hope for summer employment.

Through these and other projects, the Steamboat City Association hopes to broaden its membership and its scope of influence in St. Landry Parish, located at the heart of Louisiana's Cajun culture and heritage.



### Community nursery

Over the last year, the Tide action team has worked to find new outlets for bringing jobs, education and income to Washington. By establishing a large community nursery, along with allied neighborhood gardens, they will grow and sell plants native to the state, such as the Louisiana Iris, the state's official wildflower.

The Washington Antique Mall will provide nursery space, and the Native Louisiana Plant Initiative will help identify plants that will thrive in the area and that can later earn a profit. Neighborhood Plot Partners will oversee the gardens on the neighborhood level. Both the smaller gardens and shared community garden space will provide plants for the nursery.

The project has the potential to provide jobs and income for residents, while beautifying the town. In addition, students can learn gardening skills, money matters and civic engagement through hands-on experience.

## ■ STATEWIDE

### High schools targeted

This fall, Tide expands to a pair of Louisiana high schools through an Entergy Corporation grant. Baton Rouge's Istrouma High School and Kenner's Bonabel High School will now benefit from the structured program that allows the students to engage in thoughtful discussion and exploration before finalizing a community action plan. Much like the Tensas High School program, young leaders will speak their minds and work to solve the poverty problems that directly affect them.

## ■ TIDE IMPACT

As two of the Tide initiative's pilot sites, St. Landry and Tensas parishes saw leaders, action plans and progress emerge. With assistance from the Louisiana State University AgCenter and the Southern University Agricultural Research and Extension Center, residents have begun a variety of projects that will expand to impact the communities for years to come. Both parishes plan to repeat the Study Circle process this year to invite or reinvigorate others to join the momentum.



Note: Statistics based on 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates from [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).