

Webster Springs, West Virginia



	Webster Springs
Population (2000)	9,700
Municipal budget (2005)	\$2.4 million ⁶¹
Per capita income (2000)	\$12,300
Median household income (2000)	\$21,000
Poverty rate (2000)	32%
Minority population (2000)	1%
Proximity to urban center	101 miles to Charleston, W.Va.
Proximity to interstate highway	42 miles
Strategic approach	Philanthropy
Time frame	2004-2006

The rural community of Webster Springs created a community foundation to harness the community's volunteer spirit and provide a funding source for community development. Leaders from the town and county have come together and, as Stephanie Randolph, the Webster County Community Fund (WCCF) coordinator explains, "Our goal is to develop a sustainable source of funds to improve the quality of life in Webster."

The community and its history

Webster Springs is the seat of Webster County, a rural, mountainous area that has long relied on the coal and timber industries for jobs and economic growth. The rugged landscape contributes to the county's geographic and economic isolation. The lack of a major interstate highway has made it difficult to attract new industries and jobs. The population today continues to decline and is practically half of what it was 50 years ago. The community suffers from the "brain-drain" phenomenon, which results in an increasingly lower-skilled and older population. Today coal and timber industries continue to be the primary economic drivers in Webster County. Yet, with some of the highest poverty rates in the country, these industries are not sustaining the local economy or providing for the needs of the community.

There is a positive aspect to the county's geographic isolation: it makes the community remarkably close knit and willing to work together. According to Randolph, the concept for the WCCF originated from a suggestion by a staff member of the Benedum Foundation – a regional

A rural community creates a program to harness the town's volunteer spirit. The Webster County Community Fund is providing grants to initiatives that enhance quality of life in Webster Springs.

⁶¹ Interview with Geary Weir, Webster County Economic Development Authority, March 2007.

foundation – who noted the “tremendous volunteer spirit” and unique willingness of the Webster County community to work cooperatively. The county realized that the only way this community was going to improve quality of life was by helping itself.

The strategy

Webster Springs’ strategic approach is to use local assets to support local needs. The town is building a community foundation with small local donations and large bequests that capitalize on the desire of community members to improve the quality of life in Webster. Donors contribute either to the WCCF general fund or earmark funds to support specific causes.

The fund works by giving back the annual interest earned on the endowment through small competitive grants to the community. The award process is kept simple and open, to maintain accessibility and minimize skepticism about this relatively new program. A team of volunteers decides on how to allocate grant awards. “Anyone can show up, participate in decision-making and have a vote,” Randolph said.

For the first few years, a volunteer from AmeriCorps ran the program. Now the county has a full-time position to coordinate operations, seek donations and bequests, and ensure the fund’s long-term viability. The WCCF is affiliated with the regional Beckley Foundation, which takes much of the administrative burden off of the town. The Beckley Foundation manages the fund’s investments, which allows the county to administer grants without having to create a formal infrastructure to manage the endowment.

In 2006, its first year of grantmaking, the WCCF awarded a total of \$5,000 in grants from interest earned on the growing endowment. The WCCF received over 60 applications and funded 17 projects with grants of up to \$500. One of the groups that received funding was the Webster County Little League. The WCCF also provided funds for a sign directing tourists to the Sycamore Tree, a popular but hard-to-find local attraction.

Donors are driven by the desire to provide future Webster residents with the same opportunities and experiences the donor themselves enjoyed, Randolph said. For example, one person might want to make sure that a tree give-away program continues to exist. Other people might have fond memories of the library coming to their school and want to make sure that the library has the funding to continue similar programs. Randolph referenced a person who went to college on the GI bill. That opportunity opened up many other things in his life, and he has donated to the fund in the hopes that it will provide Webster County children with similar opportunities. “By basing on the donor’s intent, it ensures a diverse series of programs and opportunity for the future because we are all different and have different passions and different things have touched our lives,” Randolph said. The WCCF harnesses the creativity and hope of residents who wish to donate toward a positive vision of Webster County in the future.

What are the lessons from this story?

Community philanthropy can build financial, human and social capital. While the WCCF primarily benefits the community through specific grants, a secondary benefit is the development of human and social capital. For example, the organizations and individuals who compete for funding learn grant writing skills and some business fundamentals. Randolph said applicants who were not successful in receiving funds were invited to read through winning proposals to learn what makes a grant application successful. Another intangible benefit is the growth in social capital, as volunteers support the WCCF by seeking donations and bequests to the fund through one-on-one conversations with peers.

The community foundation approach is a long-term strategy. Donors to the fund must maintain long-term expectations about the results of their contribution. Unlike traditional fundraising, where specific projects seek out funds, the community foundation creates a funding source first, before projects are even on the table. This requires that donors take a leap of faith over the end use of their financial contribution. This allows the community to be flexible in terms of where the funds are awarded.

In small communities, economic development includes quality of life enhancements. Webster County recognizes there are economic benefits to be had from supporting community development activities through the WCCF. Anderson explained that the WCCF works in concert with the activities of the Economic Development Agency. The intent of the fund is to improve the quality of life to the point that quality of life becomes a draw for future employers, who in turn will provide the jobs that allow today's children to remain in the community.

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