

Among the nation's largest social service providers, Catholic Charities USA traces its roots back 275 years. Today, through innovative programs like the McDowell Family Literacy Program, 1,700 Catholic Charities member agencies and institutions fulfill a mission of providing help and creating hope for more than 7.1 million people annually, regardless of religious, social or economic backgrounds. According to Rev. Larry Snyder, President of Catholic Charities USA, "these remarkable programs are successful because they create strong partnerships with vulnerable families and organizations in the neighborhoods where they live. Equally important, the programs work to increase the families' economic assets with education, jobs and savings."



McDOWELL FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM

CATHOLIC COMMUNITY SERVICES OF McDOWELL COUNTY,
DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON, WV

Award-winning Program: McDowell Family Literacy Program

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CHILDREN DO WELL WHEN THEIR FAMILIES
DO WELL, AND FAMILIES DO BETTER WHEN
THEY LIVE IN SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

2006 FAMILY STRENGTHENING AWARDS

COAL MINERS' SONS AND DAUGHTERS

For generations, families in McDowell County, West Virginia, put aside schooling to work in the coal mines. When the mines shut down, parents found themselves without the reading, writing and math skills they needed for jobs that would support their families in today's economy. Catholic Community Services (CCS) created the McDowell Family Literacy Program to help these parents succeed—and to help their children take the first steps toward literacy as well.

“Learning that leads to literacy begins at birth,” says Annette Shumate, Director of CCS. “It’s one of the first and most important ways a parent instills in a child a sense of self-determination and the self-esteem to succeed.”

With its focus on two generations and helping those most in need, the McDowell Even Start Family Literacy Program gives priority to families with a child younger than eight and parents whose reading and/or math skills are assessed below the eighth grade level. For more than a decade now, the program has persuaded these parents that it’s never too late to learn and grow.



LOCAL MOTHERS WERE BEHIND THE OPENING
OF OUR LEARNING CENTER TEN YEARS AGO.

THEY ASKED US IF THEY COULD LEARN HOW
TO USE THE DONATED COMPUTERS THEY
WERE UNLOADING FROM A TRUCK. THAT’S
WHEN WE KNEW A PROGRAM LIKE THIS COULD
BE THE LINCHPIN TO A LIFETIME OF SUCCESS.

—Annette Shumate, Director, Catholic Community Services of McDowell County

BROADER FAMILY HORIZONS

As parents participating in the original program became more confident in their own skills, some of them sought help with other challenges. CCS staff responded with a broader band of services to strengthen families in what remains the poorest county in West Virginia.

At CCS’ two family centers, parents now benefit from classes in financial education, parenting skills, and health and nutrition. Participants continue developing skills that result in new jobs and career advancement through GED preparation, job skills trainings and long distance college coursework. CCS also partners with McDowell County Schools to integrate family literacy principles and practices into preschool, summer and afterschool programs. With a renewed Even Start grant supporting whole family literacy and accreditation as a West Virginia Welfare-to-Work Site, the program now helps even more families broaden their options.

Participating families come together at the center to support one another as they face challenges and open new horizons. “We acknowledge every milestone—from birthdays to graduating preschool to receiving a GED—and we celebrate and cry as a family,” says Shumate. “You can see the joy of shared success written on the faces of parents who have new hope for their family’s future.”

FAMILIES COUNT FAMILY STRENGTHENING AWARDS

Through a joint venture of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Catholic Charities USA, the FAMILIES COUNT Family Strengthening Awards recognize Catholic Charities with outstanding programs that work to give children what they need most—strong, capable and economically successful families. Responding to the varied needs of the families they serve, these organizations improve the economic prospects of working men and women and create the services and networks of support that all families need to realize their aspirations for themselves and their children.