



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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WMSA Collaboration Receives \$550,000 Walmart Foundation Award for Literacy

WEST MICHIGAN— April 6, 2010—The Walmart Foundation has awarded a \$550,000 grant to the West Michigan Strategic Alliance (WMSA) to fund an expansion of a pilot program for adult literacy. The West Michigan Literacy to Work Initiative will expand the *Making College Accessible* pilot underway in Kent County to include first Ottawa and Muskegon counties and eventually all eight West Michigan counties served by WMSA. The WMSA proposal was one of seven among 24 submitted nationally to receive funding as part of the Walmart Foundation's *America Works* initiative, because of great promise for improving the lives of people in our region.

[News release from the Walmart Foundation is available here:

<http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/walmart-foundation-donates-34-million-to-help-americans-get-back-to-work-89988242.html>]

The *Making College Accessible* pilot underway in Kent County provides foundational skills for occupational and post-secondary training to displaced workers. With funding from Michigan Department of Labor, Energy and Economic Growth, (DELEG), leadership from the Literacy Center of West Michigan (LCWM) and Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) and Area Community Service Employment and Training Council (ACSET, the Michigan Works agency for Kent and Allegan counties), the program takes an individualized, learner-centered approach to improving basic skills, leading to a GED and/or a Michigan National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC), and then on to additional occupational training . The pilot program is a response to the 32,000 individuals in Kent County who lack these basic credentials to obtain a living wage job and access additional funding to further their education and skills under Michigan's mainstream No Worker Left Behind (NWLB) program. It further demonstrates LCWM and GRCC's commitment to transforming Michigan's adult learning infrastructure.

Executives of the Walmart Foundation were pleased with the success of the pilot program in Kent County, which, in a very short time has served 99 individuals, with impressive results. Of those participants, 24 have completed a GED, 19 have increased their language skills, 70 have obtained a NCRC , 45 have taken financial literacy classes, 47 have taken computer classes, 26 have enrolled in college or the Job Education and Training program.

“When expanded to Ottawa and Muskegon counties with this funding, we anticipate serving an additional 250 individuals by working with existing organizations,” said Greg Northrup, WMSA president. “We see great potential to enhance this program by connecting these individuals with internship and work-study opportunities, putting their newly obtained skills to work. Because of the Walmart Foundation’s excitement about the possibilities for the Literacy to Work Initiative; they awarded us an additional \$51,000 (which is included in the total grant). We intend to use the extra funding to expand the scope of this work to the rest of the West Michigan region through pursuit of a Regional Skills Alliance working in partnership with area employers, the region’s community colleges, DELEG and Michigan Works!”

WMSA’s success in winning this grant is due, in part, to successful implementation of WIRED (Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development) programming, which was funded by a U.S. Department of Labor grant over the past 3-years.

About the West Michigan Strategic Alliance

The West Michigan Strategic Alliance serves as a catalyst for regional collaboration among the businesses, institutions and governmental units serving more than 1.4 million people living in a eight-county region including: Allegan, Barry, Ionia, Kent, Montcalm, Muskegon, Newaygo and Ottawa. WMSA works to encourage a regional mindset, which will foster collaboration on critical issues that impact how we live, learn, work and play. Additional information is available at www.wm-alliance.org

About Grand Rapids Community College

Grand Rapids Community College, established in 1914, offers both liberal arts and workforce development degrees, classes and workshops. Student enrollment on the urban campus for both credit and non-credit courses is approximately 30,000 this year. To learn more about GRCC, please visit: www.grcc.edu.

About The Literacy Center of West Michigan

The Literacy Center of West Michigan (LCWM) is a non-profit organization founded in 1986 that provides literacy services to over 1,000 adults in reading and English communication. In addition to the Adult Tutoring Program, Literacy Center of West Michigan also serves area counties through the Customized Workplace English Program providing fee-based customized workplace English language, accent modification, and multicultural training to area companies; and the Family Literacy Program which offers literacy and ESL instruction, workshops, and family literacy events in partnership with the Grand Rapids Public Schools and Head Start. LCWM is a United Way partner agency and a member of ProLiteracy America. To learn more about the LCWM, please visit: www.literacycenterwm.org.

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