



## The Manistee-Benzie County—Micro-Business Initiative Executive Summary

### *A partnership between Alliance for Economic Success and Manistee-Benzie Community Mental Health*

**Background:** The Purpose of the Micro-Business Initiative (MBI) was to provide support for micro-businesses and entrepreneurs to people who are recovering from mental illness in Manistee and Benzie Counties (a rural area of northwest Michigan). The program was developed with the intent of enabling individuals recovering from mental illness to produce income and raise self-esteem by developing micro-businesses that meet community needs. Original funding for the project came through a grant from the Michigan Department of Community Health to the Manistee-Benzie Community Health Agency (MBCMH). MBCMH contracted with the Alliance for Economic Success of Manistee County (formerly the Manistee Economic Development Organization) to coordinate the micro-business initiative for Manistee and Benzie counties and provide business development support, marketing, and networking services to help individuals with disabilities to develop their micro-businesses.

**Evaluation Framework:** An external evaluation was conducted by Deanna Draze of Draze Consulting. The primary purposes of the evaluation were to provide evaluative information regarding the efficacy and impact of the program and to identify best practices for the micro-business model. Data collection included interviews of program participants and program staff, project team minutes, archival records, press releases, and a micro-business best practice review of literature.

**Findings:** This program was unique in that two agencies with two very different missions (mental health and economic development) collaborated to provide social and emotional support along with the technical business support that enabled individuals to accelerate their recovery of mental health. Through this process, a model was developed that could be disseminated across mental health agencies as well as be used by other populations such as the unemployed or non-profit organizations.

**Identified Best Practices:** To use best practice means to use techniques or methodologies that (through experience and research) have proven to reliably lead to a desired result. A literature review was conducted to determine whether there was evidence MBI used implementation strategies associated with best practices in the field. The success of the MBI program is attributed to evidence that the program was aligned with the following best practices.

1. The target group for involvement in the program is identified. The criteria for screening processes are shared with clients.
2. Expectations are clear and goals are upfront. Group orientation sessions that include discussion of pros and cons of self-employment are used.
3. Personal interviews of potential entrepreneurs are part of the in-take process. Decisions are made ahead regarding core skills clients need to launch their business.
4. A curriculum that outlines content and process is selected prior to participant recruitment. Training is adapted to fit the characteristics of the target group.
5. Skill sets and experience necessary for program staff are clearly stated. Strategies for staff training are developed to meet the specific needs of individuals hired.

6. Personal dedication is necessary for all partners (clients, program administrators and trainers, financial support institutions, mentors).
7. Clients are assisted in self-assessment.
8. Core training will give entrepreneurs the technical support to develop and write a business plan and to help individuals to “think like entrepreneurs.” Training in financial analysis and management, as well as general business management are also core training elements.
9. Micro-business programs cultivate individuals as well as educate.
10. Assistance with financial capital is generally a necessary component to micro-business programs.
11. Mentoring and consulting opportunities that link entrepreneurs to experienced peers and professionals are created.
12. Advice on access and integration of technology is available.
13. Networks of entrepreneurs to find ways to make business connections are built.
14. Micro-business training, counseling, and mentoring are driven by needs of entrepreneurs and are inclusive of all types of talents.
15. Micro-business programs develop collaborative-leadership across private and public sectors.
16. Important components of micro-business programs include: (1) incubation of businesses with supportive facilities and services (2) provision of access to markets and offering of additional modules for those beyond start-up stage and building of curricula in skill sets.
17. Formative and summative evaluation procedures are integrated into the program to assure continuous quality improvement.
18. There is internal revenue generation along with diversified external finding with some long-term funding streams.
19. Product marketing and consulting services are developed.
20. Innovation.

**Conclusion:** In a period of two years, this project has achieved several milestones:

- Established an infrastructure for delivering a quality micro-business program to individuals recovering from mental illness.
- Has undertaken evaluation and research studies to determine best practice for future programming.
- Has worked with 39 individuals to provide them with the skills to run small businesses. At this point, 60% have launched businesses. Reports from case workers and the entrepreneurs themselves indicate there have been high leaps in the increase of self-esteem among the clients.
- Has shared the success and materials of the program across the state and the community to give hope to others.
- Is developing a funding stream to assure the long-term sustainability of the program.

Next steps for the MBI should include the continued development of the infrastructure to provide this much needed service. This includes developing a data management system; providing increased mentoring opportunities; developing marketing strategies; developing the use of technology among entrepreneurs for networking, training, and sales; and continuing the development of funding streams. The MBI has shown that they are working on all of these issues. Evidence is strong that this program can be sustained.

For more information and the full evaluation report:

[www.allianceforeconomicsuccess.com/userfiles/file/MBI%20final%20evaluation%20report%2009.pdf](http://www.allianceforeconomicsuccess.com/userfiles/file/MBI%20final%20evaluation%20report%2009.pdf)