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**For Immediate Release**

**“Out of the Darkness and Into the Light”  
MANISTEE-BENZIE MICRO-BUSINESS EFFORT SPELLS RECOVERY**

**Manistee and Beulah, Michigan** – If you’re looking for signs of hope, recovery and economic activity, look no further than Manistee and Benzie Counties where a collaborative micro-business project is spelling recovery for a group of courageous entrepreneurs.

Whether it is a book of poetry entitled “Out of the Darkness and Into the Light” written by Tammy or the stationary of Lorraine who had a lifelong dream of having her art for sale or the new born baby gift wreath done by Deb, a group of individuals who are recovering from mental illnesses have used the Manistee-Benzie Micro-Business Initiative to support their well-being and quality of life.

Twenty-two participants in the program were recognized on September 24, 2008 for completing two – 6 month business courses aimed at equipping them with a fundamental understanding of running a business in Michigan.

And, while the graduation ceremony was a capstone of remarkable progress, Deborah Nale, coordinator of the project for the Manistee-based Alliance for Economic Success, also points to some impressive bottom line results. They include:

- Of the 38 individuals who are recovering from mental illness that were referred to the program, 60% earned income by making and selling products or services, ranging from \$20 up to \$4,400 since the program began in April 2007.
- A total of 7 DBA’s (“Doing Business As”) have been filed with the State of Michigan by program participants.
- Two copyrights have been filed with the Library of Congress by program members who are authors.
- Three of the program participants were so successful that they became new taxpayers! And even received their economic stimulus checks!

Nale points out that, since the program began in April, the participating entrepreneurs have generated \$18,777 in gross sales while using the program experience to learn, grow and support their recovery.

The program is a model of what can be accomplished when organizations and businesses partner across county lines.

The program was funded through a grant to Manistee-Benzie Community Mental Health from the Michigan Department of Community Health. The micro-business project became a reality when the Community Mental Health and Manistee-based Alliance for Economic Success joined forces.

“The micro-business project has demonstrated that people recovering from disabilities can and want to manage small businesses that support their financial and emotional well-being,” said Ingemar Johansson, Chief Operating Officer for Manistee-Benzie Community Health. “It has also shown that we can work together to develop a system that can support entrepreneurs that is responsive to their individual needs and aspirations.”

Others locally echo Johansson’s sentiments.

“The business workshops gave me a chance to meet others and helped me develop socially,” said Wayne, a micro-entrepreneur.

“My concentration skills have improved because I have a lot more to do during the week and I have time to prepare myself ahead of time, set the alarm clock and think through the details of my business,” said Victoria , a micro-entrepreneur and graduate of the program.

And the effort is also gaining the attention of others outside of northern Michigan.

“We estimate that 150,000 in Michigan are in some state of recovery from mental illness,” said John Cocciolone, Chief Executive Officer of Easter Seals of Michigan. “We need to understand how public and private organizations can work together to encourage and foster than recovery process. In many cases, that recover can include micro-businesses and all of the personal reward that comes with earning some income and putting in a day of work. The results in Manistee County are impressive.”

And the success of the program is gaining legs in Manistee County.

“Based on the program results, we are working with partners in Benzie and Mason Counties to develop a system to support entrepreneurs and start up businesses across the board,” said Renee’ Ihlenfeldt, Executive Director of the Alliance for Economic Success. “With funding support from the U. S. Department of Agriculture, we will take a look at how others are successfully supporting entrepreneurs throughout the nation and then design a program that we hope will spell success for all start up businesses in our three county area. One of the lessons learned from the micro-business initiative is that we need a system that responds to the needs, dreams and challenges of each individual and that the success of businesses often happens one business at a time.”