

December 2013 Vision & Analysis A Vision for Rebuilding Vermont and America's Families, Middle Class and Small Communities

"The wood furnace works GREAT! We don't have to worry about it leaking, us or the kids getting sick! Thank you, what a blessing Faith in Action has been; we just can't thank you enough." Young seniors, who had recently been granted guardianship of two grandchildren, living by necessity off grid on a class four road.

Just as it was a tragic national mistake to straighten rivers and drain swamps, which now we are at great expense having to undo, so must we recognize that we cannot continue to drain our communities of their resources, self-governance and socio/economic prerogatives in favor of urban centers and the politically well connected. We need to make it our priority to re-empower communities to be the creative absorbent societies of safety, innovation and invention, which they have historically been.

The future of America depends upon us! Well, not quite literally but upon the reinvigorating work in small rural communities by local aware citizens and small non-profits, most of whom operate on fumes, hope, and a deep desire to help their neighbors in need. Together we are pioneering new applications of an old and historically proven idea that *community is the most tested, successful and sustainable medicine for healthy families, youth, aging and protection of people in times of vulnerability.*

We can no longer afford to ignore the fact that family and small communities have been the cornerstone of human civilization and have become Vermont and rural America's most prized legacy. Yet today these time-tested, neighborly incubators of healthy, creative citizenry are in disarray and rapid decline with many predicting their ultimate disappearance.¹ Large, expensive top down solutions to address the wide array of 'problems' caused by the fragmentation of families and communities seem to have increased the very problems they were created to solve.

Today's challenges provide us with the opportunity to rethink current ways, to recognize that everyone has something to give, and that we need each other to create the kind of community in which we all want to live. To solve today's difficult social problems now including shelter, jobs, supplemental food, and even hope, we need the engagement of compassionate neighbors to do work that the market does not value: caring volunteer work, mentoring work, civic work, and environmental work. It's a different way of thinking which we convert into a different way of acting to rebuild community through revitalization of volunteerism and creative economics in each local community.

"When the top cheerleader for rural America has some harsh words for the people he represents, it might be time to take notice."² Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack delivered a dire warning to the 51 million farmers, ranchers and other residents inhabiting rural America before a farm group in Washington. His message: "Rural Americans are becoming less relevant in the country's increasingly urban landscape, and unless they find a way to reverse the trend, their voice will continue to fall on deaf ears in Washington and around the world." *Christopher Doering Garnett, Washington Bureau*

¹ See *Will the Voice of Rural America Fall Silent?* U.S. Ag. Secretary Tom Vilsack

² *Ibid.*

Our to-be-regionally deployed COMMUNITY INVESTMENT CENTERS' purpose is to train and create jobs for Vermonters who are under or unemployed while producing marketable products. Our goal will be to decentralize this model making our training, production, and associated services available to local populations. We seek to demonstrate that with locally sensitive and appropriate partnerships any community can learn not only to take care of its own but also to nurture and develop the talents, skills and dreams of its citizens. CIC's will train for and provide jobs while sustaining folks in their search for rewarding work, family security, and an improving lifestyle. *For potential adjunctive programs please see addendum notes.*

"Thank you for the beautiful ramp that we now have thanks to you and the Faith in Action network. Having a ramp was one of the key elements needed in order for my mother to live safely at home again after a long stay in the nursing home." - Lucy

Again, Agriculture Secretary Vilsack: "Unless we respond and react, the capacity of rural America and its power and its reach will continue to decline. Rural America, with a shrinking population, is becoming less and less relevant to the politics of this country and we better recognize that and we had better begin to reverse it."³ In the past four years, he said more than 50 percent of rural counties have seen their population decline.

Faith in Action Northern Communities Partnership's demonstrated, potentially game changing model and approach to innovation and service delivery along with its planned economic opportunity expansion and community in-reach is now poised to expand.

Following our historically validated policy of placing function (needs) ahead of form, and our 'pay forward' visioning we now have the opportunity to test the wider development of our paradigmatic model. With Vermont having proved itself to be right-sized, experienced in ingenuity and innovation, being the second "grayest" state in the nation and with its 3 Northeast Kingdom counties comprising the state's poorest, most isolated and needy area, the opportunity is available to meet needs while further developing our model and coverage. The life-giving, sometimes life-saving successes of our volunteers to deliver, augment, extend and leverage existing social services for Vermont's growing number of families, seniors and disabled neighbors in need, even in this pilot phase, has already become a critical component to Vermont's local service and free food distribution matrix attested to by the State's largest agency – the Agency of Human Services.

Our wonderful volunteers come from all walks of life, the only test being to be a willing, responsible person who wants to devote some of his/her time to helping others.

How has FIA positively impacted you? *"It has given my family an opportunity to help members of the community out so they can see not everyone has everything they need. My family would not have the experience without FIA. Let me know if you need more."* Paula – Lyndon Institute Mathematics Teacher

We believe that if we build on our latest successful 7-year, 2-office, five county pilot demonstration, while learning as we serve and grow, that we will soon be ready to roll out a statewide demonstration with national implications. This is a dynamic vision which will hopefully be viewed as a successful, historically demonstrated answer to today's pressing problems which 'tangle people in the safety net'⁴ and to the ever-growing budget and food shortfalls in both the public and private sector over/against constantly growing needs, and sadly increasing family and community fragmentation.

³ See *Will the Voice of Rural America Fall Silent?* U.S. Ag. Secretary Tom Vilsack

⁴ See *Caledonian Record, The Caledonian Record Publishing Company, St. Johnsbury, VT 13 part series, September 2012*

"I am here because I have 4 kids and a husband and myself so only have 1 income and need a little extra help with food. Have 1 child with health problems. Also have 2 temporary people with me." – Food Share Recipient

Brief Overview: We were officially founded on a 20-below-zero January 2004 morning in Cabot, only weeks after notification of approval of our \$35,000 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 18-month start-up grant and are now in our 7th year since opening a pilot satellite office in Lyndonville to serve the 56 towns and gores of Vermont's three poorest, most rural counties, known collectively as the "Northeast Kingdom", who suffer the state's highest rates of poverty, unemployment and isolation. They are a federally designated REAP (Rural Economic Area Partnership) zone, while the poorest of the three – Essex County – has also been designated a USDA food desert.

Knowledge and Innovation: Our planning is experientially wizened and tempered by our increasing knowledge of key community differences and varying needs. We do not believe communities can be successfully revitalized without, in addition to neighbors voluntarily helping each other, creating good solid employment and apprenticeship opportunities. **This has led us to conclude that a new entrepreneurial approach to social service outreach, funding, and community reinvigoration is needed.**

Because we endeavor to meet immediate individual and community needs, while at the same time working to identify and develop ways to remediate the underlying causes of local poverty and hopelessness, it is difficult to categorize or communicate our compassionate alacrity, full story and future possibilities.

"My husband is a disabled Veteran and unable to do many things. NEK Faith in Action has shoveled our roof, and put up a retaining wall for us. I don't know how we would manage without their continued help. They are a blessing!" - Jean

Our vision is to create a statewide resurgence of creative communities, families, citizens and self-sustaining local economic vitality by working with those who, throughout human history, have been the backbone of human progress, creativity, invention, and stability.

We believe that the human service sector must, over time, be transformed by compassionate local, grass-rooted community and neighborhood need-related responses.

We re-invigorate community vitality and compassion, through volunteerism and entrepreneurial creative "economics as if people mattered"⁵. Through neighbors voluntarily helping neighbors, we are developing the model for sustainable long-term ability to provide needed services, offer companionship, and improve housing stock, so that our neighbors in need, seniors and the disabled feel protected and valued, knowing their community still cares. Currently, our volunteer programs and services provide the "missing link" of community support. Where necessary, we exchange referrals with other federal and state-funded services helping us all to be more effective. We believe in the dignity and worth of every individual and respond to the needs of the most vulnerable in our community. Volunteers provide vital support such as transportation, meals, company, fuel and moving assistance, shoveling, home repairs, etc. to help vulnerable people remain independent. Our rich community character of closeness, honesty and diversity was built upon intergenerational trust and caring for one another, as neighbors helping neighbors, and can only be sustained by rediscovering the joys of helpful, creative, neighborly engagement.

⁵ Subtitle of Economist Fritz Schumacher's book "Small is Beautiful".

"I don't know what I would do without Faith in Action! I have no way to get to the doctors." - Carole

Regional and Statewide Leadership: Under a \$42,000, 2006 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant with \$10,000 matching funds from the Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DIAL), we founded, are fiscal agents for and continue to lead the now 18 member, **Northern New England Volunteer Caregivers' Network** (www.nnecaregivers.org) consisting of programs in Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. Under a two-year \$80,000 Jessie B. Cox Trust grant we are building cooperation, sharing best practices and have developed a toolkit for starting or expanding similar programs for which our pilot NEK office is the paradigmatic example. Having a network with which to share experiences, expertise and innovation has helped everyone's success.

NOTES

Our proposed grass-rooted, mostly volunteer powered NEK Charitable Fund has initial capital interest pending, and we are in the process of identifying existing community disbursed groups to facilitate local implementation.

Community Investment Centers' potential adjunctive programs

- Micro-lending
- Women's Venture Initiatives modeled on WREN in New Hampshire
- Our proposed Veteran's Ingenuity Venture Fund
- Resurrection of Multi-Family Farming Cooperatives guided by experienced farmers but powered by resident families seeking a new and better life and environment for their children

The secret of happy people is not professional or financial success. Instead, it's community involvement, healthy relationships, and helping others. *According to a 25 year study published online the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in October 2010.*