



## Agency Happenings

### IMPACT Community Action Part of Innovative Learning Cluster

The Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED) – a non-profit organization that empowers low- and moderate-income households to build and preserve assets by advancing policies and programs that help them achieve the American dream – launched an innovative Learning Cluster this year with 11 organizations throughout the country, including IMPACT Community Action in Franklin County.



The Learning Cluster is an 18-month program that is bringing together non-profit organizations that offer workforce, housing or emergency assistance programs to work on embedding financial capability strategies into their programs. The Learning Cluster is designed to create new connections and collaborations between the organizations to learn how to do this.

CFED put out a Request For Proposal (RFP) for participation in the Learning Cluster at the end of last year. Christopher Jones, Financial Services manager for IMPACT, commented that when he saw the RFP, he thought it would be a perfect fit for IMPACT because they already incorporate financial training into their workforce programs and want to do more. Out of 111 applications, IMPACT was one of 11 organizations chosen to participate.

The Learning Cluster started with a kick-off event in Washington, D.C. in January where the 11 participating organizations could meet each other, discuss what they're currently doing, what ideas they have and what the next steps would be. They have monthly calls with the group as a whole and with their respective focus areas of either workforce, housing or emergency services, with IMPACT in the workforce

group. CFED provides them with various tools to work with and discuss on the calls. The cluster had a second meeting earlier this month in Chicago.

“The goal of the Learning Cluster is to try and establish a model or case study so that if an organization wants to incorporate financial capabilities into their programs, we can say here are ideas and tools you can use no matter where you are in the country,” Chris said. “For IMPACT, our goal is to better connect financial education into our programs. My goal has always been to incorporate financial education into everything we do. We’re trying to combat poverty and you need financial capability initiatives to do that. People need to learn how to budget, how to save, and understand their credit. Through this Learning Cluster, we’re hoping to better infuse the things that we do in Financial Services into Workforce Development, and hopefully later into Emergency Services and other programs.”

Chris said that what he’s learned so far from being involved in the Learning Cluster is that IMPACT is a couple of steps ahead of the other agencies nationwide in incorporating financial education. Because of this, they are able to help the group by sharing some of the things they’ve learned. As an example, IMPACT provides a stipend to participants in their workforce programs and recently switched to using pre-paid cards rather than checks so that participants do not have to utilize costly check-cashing companies to cash their checks. They have been sharing that process with the group. IMPACT is also learning from the others how to incorporate some of their other financial service programs into their workforce programs, such as their Individual Development Account (IDA) program. “They are giving us tools to help us map out a process,” Chris explained.

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Over the course of the 18-month Learning Cluster, the group will create processes for implementing financial capabilities into programs, and they will have time to test the processes and see if they can be duplicated. They will be evaluating the processes throughout the program and at the end, they will have a model or case study for other organizations to learn from. “As a Community Action Agency and with this being our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the fact that we’re leading the charge in this program is pretty awesome,” Jones commented. “Because at our core, our goal is ending poverty any way we can and infusing financial capabilities is at the heart of that.”