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Three Southside Nonprofits Merge Operations – Strengthening for Lean Times

Public library pioneers new model of community support program

Hopewell -- The Appomattox Regional Library System (ARLS) announces the merger of three separate local nonprofit programs: the Southside Virginia Nonprofit Resource Center (SVNRC), Focus INC and ConnectSouthside.org into one combined group. The group will operate as a program of the Library under the governance of the ARLS Board of Trustees. The merger combines the strengths of each program with the resources of the library to provide more effective capacity building support to Southside's community-based organizations.

Developing a new name, unified strategic planning and reorganization of the Advisory Council for the newly merged group are underway with guidance from the Virginia Network of Nonprofit Organizations. The Advisory Council, comprised of community leaders from throughout the Southside region has been meeting monthly with staff to implement the vision of the partnership.

“The group’s mission fits well with the library’s mission to provide services and programs to the community through support of life-long learning and the exchange of ideas. It is a perfect fit with our focus on effective use of traditional library resources and emerging technologies,” said ARLS Director, Scott Firestine. He added, “We know that when libraries are transformed through new opportunities so are the communities they serve.”

The Nonprofit Resource Center located in the ARLS main library in Hopewell provides books and other materials on starting and managing nonprofit organizations as well as free access to

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online resources such as the *Foundation Center Directory Online*. “We see the Center also growing toward more of a meeting place and incubator for collaborative and innovative ideas and action,” said Chuck Koutnik, Coordinator of the Resource Center since it opened. Focus INC, previously a program of The Cameron Foundation, provides nonprofit training workshops. ConnectSouthside.org is the free, community-based knowledge network that provides one-stop, on-line access to these and other local resources and facilitates communication and advocacy. Enhancing the ConnectSouthside.org web-based technology through new and innovative applications is a key component of providing expanded resources and services.

“This merger is a collaboration of programs with a similar vision of a stronger community through stronger community benefit organizations - by joining we strengthen and sustain our efforts,” said Wendy Austin, who has been named as Director of the merged group. “We are dedicated to being a state-of-the-art resource for the success of the nonprofit sector in the Southside region.” The merged group will serve the cities of Colonial Heights, Hopewell and Petersburg and the counties of Dinwiddie, Prince George, Sussex and southern Chesterfield.

As with any merger, there have been challenges – a shared vision is not enough to make it work. “Working through the details hasn’t been easy but we definitely have the elements for success in place: mutual respect, adaptability, and skilled leadership among the most important,” said Austin.

Equally important for success are the ideas and participation of the Southside region’s nonprofit community and the community at-large. **An information sharing meeting of the community steering committee is scheduled for Friday, March 20, 9 – 11:00 am at the Appomattox Regional Library in Hopewell.** Interested people are invited to participate. To register online go to www.ConnectSouthside.org or contact Sara Hinojosa, Coordinator for ConnectSouthside and Focus INC at (804) 458-6329 ext. 2013 or shinojosa@connectnetwork.org.

The merged group is funded through grants to the ARLS from The Cameron Foundation and the John Randolph Foundation. ConnectSouthside.org is a partner affiliate of the ConnectNetwork.

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