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Partnership of Community Organizations Announces Southwest Florida MicroEnterprise Project

Fort Myers, FL (March 10, 2010) – A collaboration of local partnering organizations is announcing a new community project called the Southwest Florida MicroEnterprise Project. Founding partners are the Southwest Florida Community Foundation (SWFLCF), Goodwill Industries of Southwest Florida, The Southwest Florida Enterprise Center/City of Fort Myers, SCORE, and ACCION, USA with several more getting ready to come onboard. The project will provide training and loans for individuals with low-to-moderate income and/or individuals with other disadvantages, specifically the unemployed, to start their own businesses. The project has a five-county reach: Charlotte, Hendry, Glades, Lee, and Collier.

Considered the backbone of our economy, a microenterprise is any type of small business that has fewer than five employees. Microenterprises typically do not meet the credit and/or collateral requirements necessary to access conventional financial services due to factors such as business type, length of time in business, or insufficient credit history.

According to Julia East, SWFLCF's President and CEO, "This project is the result of a real grassroots effort by members of our community. Very shortly after a small study group was formed to explore the possibility of supporting microenterprise locally, we had a group of energetic partner organizations that were ready to make it happen."

Further highlighting the collaborative effort, Julia East notes that each partner has a distinct role to play in the project. "The community foundation's role will be to solicit, accept, and disburse funds on behalf of the Southwest Florida MicroEnterprise Project, and we will be the main source of reporting to financial supporters. All funding will flow through the community foundation, and our Board of Trustees has committed \$20,000 per year for three years to get the project started."

As for running the program, Goodwill Industries of Southwest Florida will be the administrator, coordinating the training, mentoring, and loan applications of clients. The training curriculum that will be used was developed by the renowned Kauffman Foundation, which specializes in supporting entrepreneurship. Over 300,000 entrepreneurs have been trained using this curriculum since 1993. Goodwill locations in other states have already used it, so our local Goodwill is familiar with its success.

SCORE has partnered in the project to help provide and recruit mentors, who will work closely with program participants in developing their business plans. Mentorship is seen as one of the key needs as this project grows, and interested community members are encouraged to visit the project's website at www.swflmicro.com.

The Southwest Florida Enterprise Center/City of Fort Myers will provide training space and conduct the training. Through the rigorous training curriculum, clients will determine if their projects are viable and if they should move forward with their business plans.

Successful completion of this program makes a client eligible to pursue a microloan with ACCION, USA, which specializes in working with small businesses that do not meet the credit and/or collateral requirements necessary to access conventional financial services.

The project has an official launch date of May 1, 2010, which is also when prospective participants can begin sending applications to Goodwill Industries of Southwest Florida. However, the Southwest Florida Community Foundation has already been actively seeking financial supporters for the project, and hopes that donors will be energized to become involved. The three-year funding goal is \$350,000. After three years, there are plans in place to make the project sustainable, so SWFLCF's main focus right now is to provide the initial seed money.

Says Julia East, "By supporting the Southwest Florida MicroEnterprise Project, donors are strengthening small businesses, which are the heart of our local economy, and helping to put people back to work at the same time. This partnership project wants to relieve pressure on families in our communities, reward an entrepreneurial spirit, and create a model of a sustained collaborative effort that will benefit Southwest Florida well into the future."

For more information about the Southwest Florida MicroEnterprise Project, visit www.swflmicro.com.

The Southwest Florida Community Foundation has been supporting the communities of Lee, Charlotte, Collier, Glades, and Hendry counties through endowed funds for over 33 years. With 331 endowed funds, the Community Foundation has provided more than \$45 million in grants and scholarships to the communities it serves. For more information, please call 239-274-5900, or visit their web site at www.floridacommunity.com.

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