



OHIO FOLK CENTERS NETWORK

Economic Transition Plan

*Prepared by the Federal Valley Resource Center, United Plant Savers and
Little Cities of Black Diamonds Council*





THE LEADERSHIP TEAM

With a combined 90 years of experience serving southeast Ohio's Appalachian communities, our three anchor partners have come together to lead the Ohio Folk Centers Network.

United Plant Savers (Meigs County)

United Plant Savers (UPS) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit founded in 1994 by herbalist Rosemary Gladstar to protect native North American medicinal plants from habitat loss and overharvesting. The organization manages a 370-acre botanical sanctuary and the Brickhouse Folk Innovation Hub. UPS brings deep understanding of Appalachian Ohio's bio-economy and is poised to develop a workforce of culture bearers who can steward Ohio's at-risk plants while building viable businesses around herbal medicine, artisanal tea and ecotourism experiences. The organization has already invested more than \$2.5 million in tourism expansion and economic development in Meigs County.

Federal Valley Resource Center (Athens County)

Based in the former Rome-Canaan School in Stewart, Ohio, the Federal Valley Resource Center (FVRC) has been a community staple since 1999. The organization manages a five-acre property with four buildings, where it cultivates cultural arts through community concerts, arts & music lessons and regional festivals. The center uses a model that co-locates these cultural investments with other vital community services, including a food pantry, thrift store and mobile health units. FVRC's cultural programming has drawn over 100 out-of-town visitors annually and has helped a network of local artists grow traditional practices into sustainable sources of livelihood.

Little Cities of Black Diamonds Council (Perry County)

Little Cities of Black Diamonds Council (LCBD) has stewarded the rich history of southeast Ohio's Appalachian coal towns since 1993. Representing more than 75 communities across Athens, Hocking, Morgan and Perry Counties, the organization maintains a historic archive, conducts original research, collects oral histories and produces community events and festivals celebrating the region's heritage. LCBD has been a leader in development of the region's tourism economy, coordinating a network of nonprofit partners, village governments and local businesses to make the region a destination for heritage tourism, and investing in the \$2.5 million development of a gateway tourism facility connecting the Little Cities region to the adjacent Hocking Hills. Its Little Cities Heritage Interpreter Program trains local residents to act as historic interpreters, giving live performances at heritage sites to support regional tourism.



TAKING STOCK

Our anchor partners have undergone significant planning efforts that inform the Ohio Folk Centers Network Strategy, including a year-long POWER funded planning project resulting in a comprehensive feasibility study. Here is what we've learned from key stakeholders.

Community Members

Surveys and interviews with community members have shown a strong desire for the preservation of southeast Ohio's cultural heritage and the bridging of those traditions into sustainable livelihoods. One respondent to a community survey said:

"It is my home, it's what I know. It's what has helped shape me into the person that I am. I want those that come after me to know and understand the simplicity of the times I came from, why I chose to stay, why I support my tiny village, what gave this village life."

Past workforce development initiatives in the region have often been met with lackluster results. Local residents express feelings of cultural dissonance in many workplaces, and the desire for more opportunities to remain in their communities

and earn a living that feels aligned with their culture and values. The herbalists, artists and heritage interpreters who work with our existing programs have expressed great joy at developing their traditions into sources of reliable income.

Local Businesses

As demand for outdoor recreation and culturally authentic tourism experiences climbs, local entrepreneurs see opportunities to establish and grow businesses that support tourism. As two owners of short-term rental properties told us:

"The majority of our guests come to explore the Hocking Hills. But Southeastern Ohio is far more than one park. It is a region with post-industrial history, Appalachian culture, and landscapes that stretch well beyond any single attraction. Ohio has rightly recognized this corridor as a recreational destination for major metropolitan areas like Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati."

"Surrounded by Wayne National Park, with access to the national park trail systems; hiking, horse, and SPV, and the Begley family's investment in a campground, a new tourism industry is beginning to swell."

Within that economy, we are hearing demand for culture bearers to help businesses provide place-based and culturally rooted products and experiences. As one manufacturer put it:

"Building a manufacturing business in Appalachia has also required us to overcome significant workforce challenges. The sewing and textile skills needed to operate a modern garment factory no longer exist in our region."

Cases like these have shown us that demand exists for practitioners of traditional skills, but partners are needed to match those practitioners with the businesses who need them.

Healthcare Providers

The OFCN Feasibility Study highlights the benefits of co-locating social services within arts initiatives. Persons interviewed at the Heritage Community Clinic at Ohio University's College of Osteopathic Medicine described underutilization of their mobile health units in regional villages. A report for the Perry County Health Department identified lack of awareness as a major reason services remain underutilized. The Living Traditions initiative, sponsored by FVRC, has piloted the co-location of healthcare services within community festivals and has observed that the practice effectively fosters social inclusion and reduces stigma.

Educators

Regional educators emphasize the importance of preserving southeast Ohio's cultural traditions and the benefits of incorporating local heritage, arts and botanical knowledge in the classroom. Educators have said:

"My students engage deeply with questions about how Appalachian communities navigate economic transitions while maintaining a strong sense of place."

"These collaborations are always superb learning opportunities for students."

Across the region, public schools, universities, youth programs and libraries have benefitted from the presence of culture bearers who can engage students with place-based knowledge. A director of one local youth program said:

"[The interpreters] present research-based history lessons with hands-on touch and feel of historic tools, work relics, and mechanisms through which to tell their stories. Their presentations are becoming smoother and more engaging every time our kids at camp get the chance to see and interact with them and share their hands-active knowledge."

Local Governments

Village Governments have expressed strong awareness of the need for regional economic development, but limited capacity to prioritize such initiatives. Villages currently struggle with low tax revenue, aging infrastructure and increased demand on emergency services and many assert that they do not have the human resources to apply for or administer additional grant funding. They are encouraging of nonprofit partners who take on these efforts to allow village councils to focus on other priorities.

County Commissioners have been very supportive of culturally-based economic revitalization initiatives, especially those that can widen the reach of tourism across southeast Ohio's smaller communities. As one set of commissioners has put it:

"Perry County has experienced significant growth in outdoor recreation and cultural heritage tourism. A recent report by Tourism Ohio confirmed that both day and overnight visitors contribute millions of dollars annually to Perry County's economy, supporting jobs and stimulating local businesses."



DEFINING SUCCESS

Building on what we've heard from stakeholders, we've developed goals and metrics for success.

Goals & Shared Community Vision

The goals of the OFCN project are distilled from the input we've heard from our community members, local businesses, healthcare providers, educators and village and county governments. These goals represent a vision of a successful future.

- Appalachian Ohioans will be able to earn livelihoods that align with the knowledge, skills, traditions and values of their cultural heritage.
- Local community members will have defined roles within the growing regional tourism economy, so our local families and communities can benefit from that growth.
- Our cultural assets will be preserved, so that our history and cultural traditions are not lost to future generations, and are utilized to build strong communities.
- We will have channels that connect our elders and youth so that traditions may be handed down for generations.
- Our Main Streets will be revitalized, especially our historic structures.
- Our social services will be culturally inclusive and reach the people of our communities without fear or stigma.
- We will have sustainable sources of economic growth, so that Appalachian Ohioans do not need to choose between stable economic futures and deep roots in their local lands and communities.

Measures of Success

These metrics will help us evaluate the participation, efficacy and impact of the OFCN.

- **Individuals Served**
How many local people participate in this program?
- **Businesses Created/Improved**
How many new businesses are created or existing businesses grow as a result of this program?
- **Communities Served**
How many communities are reached by program activities or businesses created and improved under this program?
- **Cultural Assets Preserved**
How many cultural assets, including stories, traditions, practices and tangible assets are preserved in our communities as a result of this program?
- **Economic Growth**
How many new or extended visits occur as a result of this program? How much new spending comes to the region?



THE OHIO FOLK CENTERS NETWORK

The Ohio Folk Centers Network is designed to accomplish our stakeholders' shared goals.

Connect Three Ohio Folk Centers into a Continuous Network

Our three anchor partners all have expertise, connections and existing investment that strengthen this initiative. By networking these centers together, we increase our capacity to successfully execute the other pillars of this program.

Specifically, each organization is already investing in training and business development efforts with a different subset of culture bearers—botanists, artists and heritage interpreters. Collaboration between these partners will allow us to reduce redundancies while serving all three groups of culture bearers.

Establish a Credentialing Pathway

Southeast Ohio's culture bearers provide services of great value, but are in need of ways to quickly articulate that value to the marketplace. The OFCN will establish a credentialing pathway to certify Appalachian Folk Culture Bearers in the traditions of storytelling, tradition interpretation, botanical processing, food production and folk-arts tourism marketing. Professionalization of these skills will elevate their value to tourism operators, who wish to provide authentic visitor experiences with verified cultural stewards.

Invest in Apprenticeships

This project will formalize the launch of Appalachian Cultural Interpreter and Appalachian Folk Arts Apprenticeships, paid apprenticeships that connect new artists and interpreters to experienced entrepreneurs who provide direct mentorship in sustainable business practices. This program builds on the past success of peer-to-peer learning models within our three anchor partners' existing programs.

Scale the Living Traditions Event Series

A premier year of Living Traditions piloted festivals in Athens, Meigs and Perry Counties. These festivals are hubs that bring the network of certified culture bearers into regional communities, helping pass along traditions, connect culture bearers to markets and support regional tourism by drawing visitors to these unique and authentic cultural events. The events also offer a platform for co-location of mobile services that support health and wellness within our communities.

Provide Technical Assistance

Each of our three anchor partners already has programs in place to support small businesses. By networking our resources together, we can provide more robust technical assistance and combined marketing support to help sustain and grow culture bearers' businesses.

Learn more about the OFCN at unitedplantsavers.org/ohio-folk-center-network