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News Release

For Immediate Release
July 23, 2007

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Catholic Social Services' Office of Economic Opportunity Wins National Family Strengthening Award from Catholic Charities USA

Program that serves the Appalachian communities in far Western North Carolina to receive \$25,000 Award

Charlotte, NC—The Office of Economic Opportunity in Murphy, NC—an innovative program of Catholic Social Services of the Diocese of Charlotte, NC, Inc.—has won Catholic Charities USA's 2007 Family Strengthening Award and will receive \$25,000. The Office of Economic Opportunity/Catholic Social Services (OEO/CSS) serves the far western NC counties of Cherokee, Clay, Graham and Swain.

The annual awards program, made possible by the generous support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, aims to recognize and award exceptional programs in the Catholic Charities network that take a holistic approach to providing services by supporting healthy family relationships while working to improve a family's overall financial situation and enhance the community where they live.

"The Office of Economic Opportunity is one of the brightest stars in a constellation of outstanding Catholic Charities programs working to strengthen families," said Rev. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA. "By connecting low-income families to the supports and opportunities that they need to be economically stable, this wonderful program is making a critical difference in the lives of children and their families and, in turn, building a stronger community by helping to reduce poverty."

"Our goal at OEO/CSS is to help families develop the skills needed to make better choices for building a more secure future," stated OEO/CSS director, Claudie Burchfield. "In the process, we collaborate with many local agencies, churches, and community leaders. We have eight different Christian denominations contributing in various ways to FFFF, and we're blessed to have pastors from five different Christian faith communities serving on our advisory board."

In an area with limited employment opportunities, and below state average income levels and high school graduation rates, many families struggle through hard times. Money and credit problems can destroy families, and weaken communities. Promoting responsible financial choices is a key step in maintaining a healthy community. To address these concerns, OEO/CSS created the Far West Families First (FWFF) program.

FWFF matches struggling families with ecumenical faith teams who provide support and encouragement to help families reach goals they set for themselves. Such goals might relate to debt reduction, credit building, health issues, housing concerns, education, employability, etc. In a supportive relationship, the team helps the family understand and learn the skills needed for successful problem solving and helps the family locate outside resources when needed. OEO/CSS also provides families with counseling opportunities to help them work through challenges that impede family development and stability.

Another program, the Assets Building Long-term Equity (ABLE) Financial Literacy Program, addresses financial “illiteracy” within the community. In addition to credit counseling, the ABLE program provides workshops, lectures, and special presentations on pertinent financial literacy topics. Topics range from maximizing food stamp dollars to basic budgeting and attaining affordable housing. OEO/CSS also serves as a host site for Consumer Credit Counseling Services of Asheville.

Established in 1999 by CSS Office of Justice and Peace, the inspiration for the founding of OEO/CSS was the 1997 pastoral letter *Of One Heart and One Mind*, written by the previous bishops of Charlotte and Raleigh, Bishop William G. Curlin and Bishop F. Joseph Gossman. This letter sought to raise awareness that within North Carolina many individuals, families and communities were struggling to adapt to the economic transitions taking place in the state.

OEO/CSS was one of four programs Catholic Charities USA picked for the 2007 Family Strengthening Award, chosen from submissions from local Catholic Charities agencies across the country. All four will be honored at Catholic Charities USA’s Annual Gathering in Cincinnati on September 16.

The other award winners are the El Programa Hispano of Catholic Charities of Oregon, The Thorpe Family Residences of Catholic Charities of New York, and the Southside Family Center of Catholic Charities of Hartford.

To learn more about the 2007 award winners and the finalists, visit <http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/caseyaward/>.

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Catholic Charities USA’s members—more than 1,500 local agencies and institutions nationwide—provide help and create hope for more than 7.4 million people a year regardless of religious, social, or economic background. For more than 275 years, local Catholic Charities agencies have been providing a myriad of vital services in their communities, ranging from day care and counseling to food and housing. For more information, visit www.catholiccharitiesusa.org.