



ISDA

International Sonoran Desert Alliance

Working to preserve and enrich the environment, culture, and economy of the Sonoran Desert

Individuals and Families in Crisis

Assisting Individuals and Families in Crisis

Because Ajo is a community where 23% are living below the poverty line, 13% are unemployed, and less than 50% of working age adults are in the workforce at all, and of those, only half have full-time jobs, it is inevitable that many individuals and families come into crisis each year. ISDA is not a social service agency, but we are committed to provide what assistance we can to individuals and families in crisis, while making them aware of programs and opportunities that can lead to longer-term solutions. ISDA provides a continuum of support for people of all ages in our community, including volunteer income tax preparation, adult basic education, general education development, job training, financial literacy classes, supplemental nutrition assistance, and emergency utility assistance.



ISDA/Jewel Cleanwater

Background

For several years, ISDA has worked with the Southwest Center for Economic Integrity as part of a multi-year project to understand the needs of low- and mid-income residents of rural areas for financial services and to understand the situation of rural residents in relation to managing their money. ISDA sponsored focus groups in Ajo as part of the research process, and then worked with the Center and other nonprofit colleagues to envision a new approach focused on changing financial behaviors. Using Alcoholics Anonymous and Weight Watchers as our models for successful behavior change, we agreed on a peer-support process to money management. The Center designed an eight-week process which ISDA and two other nonprofits pilot tested.

A primary goal of this, and any, financial training is to increase savings, and the generally accepted measure of success is opening a savings account. We found that many of our workshop participants had started saving as a result of their experience, but without using a traditional savings account. They devised savings schemes that fit their needs and provide rewards that are relevant to them. Examples include putting change in water bottles, putting cash in envelopes and leaving it home when going shopping, buying i-Tunes gift cards to save for a music program, and riding a

Young women are the most financially vulnerable to poverty.

bike and putting the money that would have need spent on gas in a drawer. In peer-learning settings, many approaches like this are shared and people can adopt practices that best fit their needs.

People who participate in the program are generally:

- young women who have no experience at all managing money;
- young people who are just starting out on their own and are managing their finances for the first time;
- people who have been working and raising children; and who feel they have some skill in managing money, but want to learn more to reach their goals; and
- people who are overwhelmed by financial problems and need help.



Eight VITA volunteers provided 270 volunteer hours to the community in 2014.

Money Management Workshops

Held once a week for eight weeks, ISDA's Money Management workshops are designed as a peer-support process for changing financial behaviors. These workshops represent a radical departure from the field of financial literacy programs that have been promoted for decades across the country—these “mainstream” programs have resulted in increased financial knowledge in millions of households across the country, but too seldom have produced lasting changes in financial behaviors.

Sheltering Ajo

A network of community volunteers are working to provide assistance to homeless people in Ajo. With grant funding, these volunteers have hired part-time staff for Sheltering Ajo. ISDA assists by acting as fiscal steward for the program's grant funds and by handling the hiring process through ISDA's staffing company, Ajo Works.

Emergency Assistance and SNAP

ISDA assist community residents at risk of eviction or utility shut-off in making an application to Pima County for assistance. Staff are also trained to assist residents in making application to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA)

From mid-January to mid-April each year, ISDA staff and volunteers assist low- and moderate-income community residents prepare their income tax forms. In 2014 alone, our VITA program generated \$333,422 in federal refunds and \$160,394 in earned income tax credits for the Ajo community. We have found that even though individuals and families in crisis will need to use even very large refunds to reduce debt and deal with deferred expenses, nonetheless the process of looking at their finances with the tax preparer and discussing how they plan to use their refund is an important moment to promote the opportunity to get help in changing financial habits through our Money Management workshop series.

Innovations

In cities, there are One Stop offices where community residents can access all the services they need. In our remote rural town, the closest One Stop is in Tucson, a five-hour roundtrip drive (if you have a car). With a patchwork of funders, ISDA is working to create Ajo's own One Stop Center with a continuum of services and training programs that help community residents move from financial insecurity toward economic self-sufficiency.

Alva came into the group feeling fairly confident about her ability to manage money, but being in the group made her realize that she never talked about money, and particularly money troubles, with her friends. She found that she loved the openness of the group and that there was so much she could learn from other women like herself. She was particularly intrigued by the many different ways people found to make extra money. She came away with several entrepreneurial ideas that she is going to explore.

