

ELSIE MEEKS ACCEPTS 2016 NED GRAMLICH AWARD FOR HER ROLE IN BRINGING CDFIS TO NATIVE COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH DAKOTA

Former USDA Rural Development State Director Honored with Opportunity Finance Industry's Highest Award for Dedication to Native Economic Development

PHILADELPHIA – (October 26, 2016) – [Opportunity Finance Network](#) (OFN) today announced that Elsie Meeks, former state director of the [United States Department of Agriculture \(USDA\) Rural Development in South Dakota](#), has been named the recipient of the 2016 Ned Gramlich Lifetime Achievement Award for Responsible Finance. Presented by OFN, the leading network of community lenders, the Ned Gramlich Award is the highest individual honor in the community development financial institution (CDFI) industry. Meeks will accept the award during OFN's annual [Conference](#) in Atlanta on Wednesday, October 26.

Meeks played a vital role in bringing CDFIs to the Native Community through the creation of [Lakota Funds](#), a nonprofit that promotes economic sustainability on the Pine Ridge Reservation. At the time of its creation, there were only two Native American-owned businesses on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Eighty-five percent of people in the community never had a checking or savings account and seventy-five percent had never received a loan. Since its inception, Lakota Funds has offered loans to thousands of artists and aspiring entrepreneurs, created more than 1,400 permanent jobs and helped establish hundreds of businesses.

"When we started Lakota Funds, our vision was to empower tribal members to become financially literate and self-sufficient in order to grow the economy," said Elsie Meeks. "Achieving this vision takes time, and bringing appropriate capital to Indian Country has become my mission in life. The various boards and positions I have held throughout the past 30 years have always been aimed at delivering funding to those who need it most."

"Elsie Meeks has been a pillar of strength and innovation in her advocacy, practitioner, and leadership roles," said Chrystel Cornelius, Executive Director of First Nations Oweesta Corporation. "She has worked diligently to write a new narrative on behalf of Native communities across the nation—one of opportunity and hope. She has opened doors to capitalization and asset building opportunities for Indian Country through her dedicated work on behalf of Native people. She is an inspiration to me and our entire industry."

Former Federal Reserve Governor Ned Gramlich inspired this lifetime achievement award. He was the Board of Governors' primary liaison to the Fed's Consumer Advisory Council, advising on community development and consumer finance policy matters. In fact, Meeks served on the Fed's consumer Advisory Council when Gramlich was Governor. Gramlich, who died in 2007, was an outspoken voice against predatory lending and a strong defender of the Community Reinvestment Act. From October 2006 through his death in 2007, Gramlich served on the Board of OFN.

Meeks embodies Gramlich's spirit and determination in everything she does. She currently serves as chairperson of Lakota Funds, and chairs the Advisory Council of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis' Center for Indian Country Development. She also serves on the board of the Federal Home Loan Bank of Des Moines. Prior to joining the USDA, a position she was appointed to by the Obama Administration in 2009, Meeks was president and CEO of First Nations Oweesta Corporation. She also served two terms on OFN's Board and a six-year term on the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, making her the first Native American to join the Commission. Meeks has been a member of the board of directors for CFED, Council on Foundations and the Oglala Sioux Tribe Partnership for Housing.

"Elsie has been and continues to be a driving force behind Native economic development," said Francis A. Lutz, interim CEO at OFN. "She gracefully and diligently bridged cultural, racial, and ethnic differences to build a stronger CDFI industry. Her humility is deep, her leadership is inspiring and her dedication is enormous."

In 2015, Meeks was honored with the Visionary Leader Award for Outstanding Achievement. This award recognizes individuals who have made a long-term contribution to the Native CDFI industry and whose local financing and asset building efforts inspire others.

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About Opportunity Finance Network (OFN)

Opportunity Finance Network (OFN) is the leading national network of community development financial institutions (CDFIs) investing in opportunities that benefit disinvested communities across America. Through 2015 OFN's network originated \$48 billion in financing in urban, rural, and Native American communities. This financing has helped to create or maintain more than 1,044,000 jobs, start or expand nearly 191,000 businesses and microenterprises, and support the development or rehabilitation of nearly 1.5 million housing units and 9,800 community facility projects. For more information, visit ofn.org.