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Two Outstanding Leaders are Recognized for Commitment to Building Economies in Native Communities

Detroit, MI. // Two Native community development financial institutions (CDFIs) were honored Wednesday in recognition of their commitment to excellence in the Native CDFI industry at the 2015 Native CDFI Awards Ceremony, part of the 12th Annual Native CDFI Convening hosted by Opportunity Finance Network (OFN) and First Nations Oweesta Corporation (Oweesta).

The **Circle of Honor Award** recognizes a Native CDFI that is successfully increasing access to capital and financial resources in Native communities by developing innovative loan products, promoting community development and overcoming challenges. The 2015 Circle of Honor Award winner is **Wisconsin Native Loan Fund**, a Native CDFI located in Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin. Wisconsin Native Loan Fund demonstrates outstanding leadership within the industry. Under the direction of Fern Orié, they have designed and managed financial products and technical assistance services to multiple reservations in the state of Wisconsin. By doing this, they have created partnerships between local banks, surrounding tribes and tribal members. They are recognized for their hard work and dedication to serving Native communities through CDFI efforts.

Wisconsin Native Loan Fund was selected from a highly competitive group of Native CDFI nominees and was awarded for demonstrating strong financial performance, diversity in creating lending products and development services to serve its target market and the commitment to advancing asset building efforts for Native communities on a local, state and national level. Wisconsin Native Loan Fund is led by Fern Orié, Executive Director, who accepted the award on behalf of the organization.

The **Visionary Leader Award** for Outstanding Achievement recognizes a person who has made a long-term contribution to the Native CDFI industry and whose local financing and asset building efforts make them an inspiration for others. **Elsie Meeks** has been an instrumental visionary leader in the Native CDFI movement for decades and has trail-blazed the path for all of the Native CDFIs. Her contributions, commitment, dedication, and passion in Indian Country have laid a strong foundation for the Native CDFI Industry.

“Our two award winners have been an inspiration to the whole Native CDFI field, and have proven a commitment to their respective communities as well as the industry as a whole by demonstrating a leadership role in advancing self-sufficiency and opportunity for tribal members and their communities,” said **Chrystel Cornelius, Executive Director, First Nations Oweesta Corporation**. “We are honored to give much deserved recognition to our award winners, and thank OFN for their partnership in recognizing the achievements within the Native CDFI industry.”

“Congratulations to this year’s Circle of Honor and Visionary Leader Awardees for their dedication to serving low-wealth and low-income Native communities,” said **Mark Pinsky, President and CEO of Opportunity Finance Network**. “Wisconsin Native Loan Fund is at the forefront of the field, making an unforgettable impact in the market they serve. Elsie Meeks has been a leader within the industry since its inception and continues to be a driving force behind Native economic development throughout the nation.”

The awards ceremony capped off the 12th Annual Native Convening in conjunction with the 31st Annual OFN Conference where Native economic development practitioners and tribal representatives from across the country joined hundreds of other opportunity finance experts to share and learn about new ideas, strategies for change, and innovations from the field.

For more information on Wisconsin Native Loan Fund, please visit their websites at www.winlf.org.

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First Nations Oweesta Corporation provides opportunities for Native people to develop assets and create wealth by assisting in the establishment of strong, permanent institutions and programs, leading to economic independence and strengthening sovereignty for all Native communities. Based on First Nations Oweesta Corporation’s Integrated Asset Building Model, our programs and services help build local capacity and provide powerful tools for Native community development. For more information, visit www.oweesta.org.

Opportunity Finance Network (OFN), the leading national network of private financial institutions, creates growth that is good for communities, investors, individuals, and the economy. Members of OFN are community development financial institutions (CDFIs) that deliver responsible lending to help low-wealth and low-income communities join the economic mainstream. Through 2013 OFN’s network originated \$34 billion in financing in urban, rural, and Native American communities. This financing has helped to create or maintain more than 720,000 jobs, start or expand nearly 120,000 businesses and microenterprises, and support the development or rehabilitation of nearly 1.5 million housing units and 9,500 community facility projects. For more information, visit ofn.org.