

# THE PROVIDER

## Social enterprises allow Council members to mix mission and service, seek out new markets

Creating a social enterprise is a little about good timing, and a lot about supportive leadership and finding the special niche of services that your agency is uniquely well positioned to provide while serving its mission.

Council members that have created a project to help meet revenue needs while fulfilling their missions - often called a social enterprise or social innovation - spoke of their experiences and offered some advice for agencies looking to take the plunge.

For Dr. Gary Lyon, director of youth services and special initiatives at **Centerboard** in Lynn, it was the work of advancing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) and sharing the experience and knowledge his organization has gained over many years.

Centerboard has increased its proportion of people of color in leadership roles from 14 percent to 45 percent, he said, and leaders there have immersed themselves in training and learning about the DEI process. Even after many years training and using diversity curriculum and models the work is still challenging, he said.

"As an organization there was the sense that we needed to start sharing our story with organizations who are in the same place we were ten years ago, we do this work well and we still make mistakes," he said. "Our leaders here were 100 percent supportive and with us every step."

Lyon and Kim Hopkins, director of innovation and planning at Centerboard, debuted Centerboard's DEI consulting social enterprise in a workshop at the Council's 45th Annual Convention & Expo: SpeakUp4Equity in late October and are currently starting to market the 10-week curriculum they created to outside agencies.

"It doesn't happen overnight. I would advise others to find that niche of work that they love and want to share. Really nurture it and get the key people in place in line with your mission and vision," Lyon said.

Danvers-based **Northeast Arc** has developed several social enterprises over the years, including the Breaking

Grounds coffee shop, a caning company, a shredding business and the SHINE homemade jewelry initiative.

The organization's latest effort, The Center for Linking Lives, opened its doors in October; it is 26,000-square-foot of office, training, educational and retail space at the Liberty Tree Mall in Danvers, said Noah Leavitt, director of marketing and communications.

The huge space features feature parcels, a 1,000-square-foot retail boutique storefront selling items made by individuals with disabilities, or produced by companies owned by individuals with disabilities.

Opening a retail space during a pandemic has had its challenges, Leavitt

unteer partnership.

"Ask yourself, who are some major retailers in your area who can support you?" he said.

Other members took advantage of the Providers' Council's ongoing partnership with the Boston College School of Social Work, which matches social work students with nonprofits looking to launch a social enterprise.

Penny Potter, chief program officer of **Amego Inc.**, said her agency worked with students last year to create a hydroponic "freight" farming operation.

Amego, based in Attleboro, became interested in the idea of year-round farming in empty train cars as another employment option for the adults with disabilities it serves after seeing a successful project at a nearby college, she said.

The BC students were "phenomenal" Potter said. "They helped us develop a business plan and research partnerships for management of the farm. They were full of energy and so smart."

COVID-19 has stopped the farm planning for now, Potter said. At the suggestion of the donor, the funding was redirected to PPE needed to withstand the pandemic. Amego leaders hope the freight farm can become a reality when the pandemic is over, she said.

Potter said she would encourage other agencies to explore the BC partnership as a way to launch or accelerate a good in-house idea, that needs a few more people or extra resources.

"The BC students really helped keep us on track. In our line of work, there are always things to knock you off track and the partnership kept us moving forward. We took a lot of inspiration from them."

*Want to strengthen or begin a social enterprise? Submit an RFP today to receive free consulting services from Boston College School of Social Work students. Throughout the semester, these graduate students can provide initial market research, mock budgets, marketing guidance and more depending on your agency's needs.*

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*Northeast Arc staff and volunteers arranging displays for the new parcels boutique at The Center for Linking Lives in Danvers.*

said. Foot traffic at the mall, however, is starting to pick up as people hear about the store and its offerings, which come from all across the country. "People are really excited to support the individuals by supporting the store," Leavitt said.

Leavitt said two merchandising experts from local retailing giant TJX, owner of the HomeGoods chain, volunteered their time to offer advice on boutique set-up, seasonal displays and other ways to attractively display the peppers, jams, jewelry, textiles and other handicrafts.

"They really helped us establish that boutique look," he said. He recommended nonprofits who want to establish retail social enterprises consider local businesses who might like to offer expertise as an in-kind donation or vol-