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Open House at Opportunity Center to Honor Outgoing Division Director

*Founder Robert L. Thomas Leaving the Martin Luther King,
Jr. Opportunity Center after 21 Years*

WORCESTER -- The South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC) is hosting an open house in honor of Robert L. Thomas, outgoing Division Director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Opportunity Center, 237 Chandler St., on Tuesday, Feb. 24 from 12:00 - 1:30 p.m. Thomas co-founded the MLKJ Business Empowerment Center in 1994 and was named Division Director in 2012 when the organization affiliated with SMOC. The facility was later renamed the Martin Luther King Jr. Opportunity Center.

"It has been a blessing for me to serve the people of this community for the past 21 years," the longtime Worcester resident said. "The work we do at the center is critical to improving the lives of so many in this community and in the Greater Worcester County. To lead that mission for more than 20 years has been gratifying, but I want the community to understand that I will continue to work within the neighborhoods in the ongoing pursuit of justice, educational attainment and economic parity."

Charles E. Gagnon, SMOC's Chief Operating Officer, praised Thomas's leadership and commitment to help economically disadvantaged people in the greater Worcester area learn the skills they need to build a better future. "When SMOC made the decision to affiliate with the MLKJ Business Empowerment Center, it was Robert's vision and leadership that allowed it to succeed," Gagnon said. "Over the past three years under Robert's guidance, the mission of the center has been preserved and strengthened. I know Robert will continue to be a force in this city, always ready to help empower minorities, women and low income residents to pursue new and successful opportunities in their lives."

"There had always been great synergy between MLKJ Business Empowerment Center and SMOC," according to Thomas. "We both help the disenfranchised and it was gratifying to have the

opportunity to serve more people. Both organizations envisioned this affiliation as a way to deepen and strengthen our aligned missions."

SMOC Executive Director James T. Cuddy also thanked Thomas for his years of service. "We are now stronger and our mission has been expanded because of Robert's leadership. We are truly grateful for his vision and dedicated years of service to the community," Cuddy said.

The affiliation allowed SMOC to increase the availability of workforce education and training for local residents, while providing technical assistance and opportunities for local small businesses, Cuddy noted.

Job skills development, employment search and placement, career advancement, adult education, life skills enhancement, job retention and mentoring opportunities are the important elements of the MLKJ Opportunity Center, which ultimately allow people to be more successful and independent, Gagnon added. "That is the mission of the center that was created under Robert's leadership," Gagnon said. "SMOC is deeply appreciative of his long standing commitment to help the underserved in the City of Worcester."

"We want to make sure the businesses we help are as successful as possible," Thomas said. "Our intent was to create this continuum so they have everything they need. What we give them is a pathway of support and services." Thomas added that he expects SMOC to continue working with local important partners such as the City of Worcester, the Small Business Administration, local banks, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, the Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation (MGCC) and the Central Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board (CMWIB).

In 2013, with a grant from the the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, the Ready, Willing and Able (RWA) program was created at the MLKJ Opportunity Center, providing workforce training for formerly homeless individuals from the greater Worcester area. Jan Yost, President of the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, said the program was closely aligned with the Foundation's mission to improve the lives of the region's most vulnerable population. Another of the newest programs added to the MLKJ Opportunity Center's list of services is the Green Jobs

Academy (GJA). Established last year, GJA now includes a weatherization training facility to provide subsidized on-the-job training, job-readiness workshops and job placement services, preparing the unemployed for entry-level jobs in weatherization and energy conservation. Students enrolled in the program receive specialized training and leave with certification from OSHA and in lead renovation.

To date, more than 271 weatherization installers have graduated from the program with more than 180 placed in permanent jobs. GJA works with 74 private employment partners who also provide on-the-job training, mentoring and permanent job placement.

For more information about the MLKJ Opportunity Center and its complete list of programs, call 508-756-6330.