

MLK Center in Worcester has room to grow



Robert Thomas is the founder and director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Business Empowerment Center on Chandler Street in Worcester. The agency recently changed its name to the Martin Luther King Jr. Opportunity Center. (T&G Staff/PAUL KAPTEYN)

By Donna Boynton TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
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WORCESTER — Samuel N.K. Doudu immigrated to the United States 15 years ago from Ghana. When he lost his job, he didn't know what to do next, so he focused on what he knew how to do.

Mr. Doudu is the son of a college president. As a child growing up Ghana, his family would often assist young people and invite them to their house.

"People needed help, and I can do something," Mr. Doudu said.

He took his plan, his dream and was pointed to the what was then called the Martin Luther King

Jr. Business Empowerment Center, at 237 Chandler St. He rents a small bare-walled office with one window and his shingle on the door: Center for Family Progress.

For the past two years, he has been helping immigrants assimilate to American culture and connect to education, financial, housing and other community resources. The center helps him make connections for his business.

Yet, two years ago, the MLK center was in danger of shutting down.

In 2012, the former New England Envelope building that is home to the MLK Center was about to be condemned.

Its director, Robert Thomas, a former computer salesman, contacted an old friend, James Cuddy, executive director of the Southern Middlesex Opportunity Council, to see if his agency would be interested in acquiring the building and merging the MLK Center into SMOC.

According to SMOC's 2012 annual report on file with the state attorney general's office, the acquisition allowed the MLK Center to improve its reach, and offer a more diverse range of services through SMOC's resources and infrastructure. SMOC, in turn, saw an opportunity to increase the availability of workforce education, training, business development assistance and small business resources to the population it serves.

The two entities have similar missions aimed at helping the poor and disenfranchised get back on their feet. However, there was fear in the community at the time that — despite assurances — SMOC would close the MLK Center and use it instead as a triage center for the homeless, or as a substance abuse treatment center.

Today, the MLK Center is open and prepared for growth. SMOC has placed several programs in the building, none related to homelessness or drug treatment. And the building, once threatened with demolition, is getting some much-needed attention.

"There is great synergy between what SMOC does and what we do. We both help the disenfranchised, and it is great to have the opportunity to serve more people," Mr. Thomas said. "We both saw a way to deepen and strengthen our mission."

"SMOC is an anti-poverty agency at its core," said Charles E. Gagnon, chief operating officer of SMOC. "We want to get people standing on their own two feet."

Now called the Martin Luther King Jr. Opportunity Center, it is still an economic development agency focused on job training, business education, micro-business development and business incubation. The brick building is home to an extension program, incubator businesses and other business tenants; it is still a business resource, helping people through its business library get the skills they need to be employed, make connections in the community and start their own businesses.

In addition, the MLK Center now hosts a SMOC workforce development academy.

"One thing that we want to do here at 237 Chandler St. is create a community center that brings a lot of different interests to the table, and create this to be a training a community resource," Mr. Thomas said.

While the Framingham-based SMOC has a budget of more than \$80 million, its biggest investment is in Worcester, Mr. Gagnon said. SMOC has nine workforce development programs, with \$3 million allocated to fund those programs, which include job readiness and skills training, the MLK Center, a Green Jobs Academy, and mobile resources.

SMOC is investing in the property, conducting a capital needs assessment to create its workforce development academy. Already, SMOC has spent \$40,000 to replace rotted fire escapes on the building, and is converting the heating system, installing a new elevator, and will be replacing the roof.

Inside the 42,000 square foot building is a collection of eclectic businesses that has regularly revolved over the years.

The largest tenant in the building is still the MLK Center, which uses about 5,500 square feet. SMOC's Green Jobs Academy and the Greater Worcester Housing Connection have 4,000 square feet each; the UMass Extension School rents 2,000 square feet, and then there are a smattering of small renters that include a coffee company and a Vietnamese church.

The rental fee is based on a rate of \$10 per square foot, but is no lower than \$300 per month, which includes utilities, limited use of the conference room, a shared mail and copy center, and free business seminars.

SMOC owns and manages the building, and plans to expand the reach MLK's career training academy and create an employment resource center.

"We wanted to preserve the MLK Center's mission," Mr. Gagnon said. "We need to get folks skilled training so they can maintain their independence, continue living in their neighborhoods and provide services to keep people employed. The last thing we wanted was for the MLK Center and its mission go away."

With the new partnership, SMOC brings case management experience, assisting with life issues such as day care and transportation.

"SMOC is able to wrap all of their supportive services around employment," Mr. Gagnon said. "If people are able to get a job and keep the job, they are able to pay rent and keep their obligations. We want to make sure folks can compete for living wages."

SMOC is operating a Green Jobs Academy on the second floor of 237 Chandler St. The academy was started by SMOC in 2010 with a \$700,00 grant from the U.S. Department of Energy and a \$250,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Labor. The academy built 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, 227 people have graduated from the program, with 171 placed in subsidized on-the-job training and 169 of those now permanently employed, said Gwenn Weiser, director of the Green Jobs Academy. She added that the program also has 70 employers who have partnered with the academy to provide on-the-job training, mentoring and permanent job placement.

"We are trying to create a career ladder, not only in construction and weatherization, but also for entrepreneurship," Mr. Gagnon said. "We are talking about bringing new opportunities for the unemployed and underemployed."

However, job training and a smart business plan aren't the only things needed to start a business; money is required as well. Since many people that the center works with have poor credit, no cash and no collateral, getting a bank loan is a challenge.

In 2015, with approval from the Treasury Department, SMOC and the MLK Center will offer low-income business and new businesses financial assistance through their Community Development Financial Institution under a program called the New Market Entrepreneurial Fund Inc.

"We want to make sure the businesses we help are as successful as possible," Mr. Thomas said. "We want to create this continuum so they have everything they need. What we are giving them is a pathway of support and services.

"There are opportunities here for people to go in many, many directions," Mr. Thomas said.

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