

BEAN TOWN ADVOCATES BOOST BELEAGUED CITIZENS

BY BETH GRIFFIN

The first paycheck for the smiling ex-offender . . . the updated resume showing new job skills in the growing “green jobs” sector . . . the affordable utility bill that reflects energy-efficient home improvements.

Before any of these scenes can actually happen, the people and community groups who make them possible work for years to understand and shape the decision-making process so individuals can participate in breaking the cycle that ensnares them in poverty. Their tools of choice are perseverance, commitment, and creative thinking.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development funds local organizations that work at the grassroots level to identify community needs, develop solutions,

help people get involved in public life, shape the use of available funds, and influence legislation that affects communities. Two groups in Boston use CCHD grants to help their members build better lives through sustainable employment. But that’s the end product of a complex process.

The **Boston Workers’ Alliance (BWA)** is a five-year-old member-led organization of unemployed and underemployed people combating joblessness in the city’s poorest communities. It grew out of roundtable educational forums convened by veteran leaders who advised the city council representative from a marginalized district. More than 300 people attended the discussions.

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BWA celebrates an open house at its new storefront office on Blue Hill Ave.

FROM THE DIRECTOR

Brothers and Sisters,

“The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time” (Jn 3:1).



The Lord is forgiving. After Jonah ran away from the Lord the first time and was cast out into the sea and into the whale, God gave Jonah a second chance at obedience. Like Jonah, we all deserve a second chance.

The Boston Worker’s Alliance (BWA) combats unemployment in low-income Boston communities, working to end discrimination against job applicants with non-violent criminal records. A non-violent offense can affect a person’s ability to obtain a job for up to fifteen years in the Boston area, leading to higher rates of unemployment.

“The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it” (Gn 2:15).

The other group featured in this issue is Community Labor United (CLU). CLU works to make energy-efficient opportunities available to low- and moderate-income citizens through both jobs and reduced utility bills. CLU is also working with the Green Justice Coalition to require utility companies to provide fair living wages, training opportunities, and other benefits to their workers.

Both organizations fight for justice in the low-income communities of Boston. Projects such as these are important to local economies, especially given the current levels of unemployment.

As we spend our summer enjoying movies, vacations, and other treats, or even if we are part of the population the economy has bruised, let’s remember those who are not afforded things most Americans take for granted—the ability to find a job without prejudice, obtain fair wages, and save money when staying comfortable costs an arm and a leg.



Ralph McCloud
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

What Is CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed over \$280 million to more than 7,800 low-income-led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD’s investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.

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A four-month-long listening project among the predominantly African American population of the district identified unemployment and discrimination against job applicants with criminal records as the district's primary concerns.

Aaron Tanaka, BWA's executive director, says most ex-offenders were convicted of non-violent crimes, many of them drug-related. In Massachusetts, a felony remains on a person's criminal record for 15 years after the completion of probation or parole, and a misdemeanor stays for 10 years. This is known as the look-back period. Aaron says this law effectively excludes many rehabilitated offenders from getting any kind of job for 20 to 25 years after they are released from prison.

He says, "Seventy percent of big employers would not hire anyone with a drug offense. People coming out of prison into an already difficult job market were wholesale excluded from jobs because of a question on the application asking about felony convictions. Even if they were qualified, checking that box on the application guaranteed that it would be filed in the trash bin."

The 80 initial members of BWA committed themselves to getting the Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) laws changed, to creating a temporary employment agency for people with criminal records, and to helping members start their own businesses. They worked together to share their concerns with policy makers and candidates for elected office.

After one of the people who promised reform of CORI laws during the campaign was elected governor, BWA organized a group of 1,500 people to march peacefully from their Roxbury neighborhood to the statehouse in Boston to remind the new governor of his pledge. Aaron says it was the state's largest mobilization of former prisoners in recent history.

Finally, BWA's efforts met with success. The city of Boston removed the question about past offenses from its municipal job application in 2005 and ordered its vendors to do the same.

Governor Patrick Duval signed an executive order reducing the look-back period to 10 years for a felony and 5 years for a misdemeanor. Homicide and sex offenses are excluded. BWA supports state legislation to codify the executive order.

"Employers can still check criminal records," says Aaron, "but they can't use the question to weed out

people up front without considering their resumes and references. Employers have the discretion to balance the age of the record and the seriousness and relevance of the offense to the job they're filling."

He describes a BWA founding member who worked at a call center and who was given increasing levels of responsibility. She was offered a promotion to the company's corporate headquarters, but a check of her criminal record showed a long-ago conviction. "She was demoted. Her hours were changed and she was forced out," he says. "She felt isolated and ashamed."

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—AARON TANAKA
BWA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The company's loss was BWA's gain, Aaron says, because the unemployed worker grew as a leader and became an advocate for people like herself. She was hired as an organizer for a large union and is now on the verge of completing her bachelor's degree.

BWA's temporary employment agency, named the Boston Staffing Alliance, is poised to open after four years of careful planning. Weeks before its official launch, 10 workers were hired for an assignment that paid 10 dollars an hour.

CCHD helped BWA turn its great idea into an operable agency that will help former offenders develop a work history and showcase themselves to potential employers. Active BWA members are given preference for job placements.

"CCHD is our primary funding partner in this process," says Aaron. "We appreciate their unique willingness to invest in a population that is broadly neglected. CCHD is making a crucial opportunity for people to earn a decent wage and lift themselves out of poverty."

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Across town, **Community Labor United (CLU)** has forged a coalition of labor unions, community groups, and environmental interests to achieve energy efficiency goals and put low-income people to work in living-wage jobs that provide career opportunities. That group is called the Green Justice Coalition.

Lisa Clauson, CLU's co-director, describes how CLU is working to make sure that low- and moderate-income people have access to energy-efficient, green opportunities funded by the federal economic stimulus program and a \$1.4 billion state energy plan. The group is concerned about access both to the technologies that reduce energy bills and to the actual jobs that install and maintain efficient systems.

Lisa says Massachusetts utilities are required by groundbreaking 2008 green legislation to maximize their energy efficiency before they can buy or build more power-generating capacity. This mandate is overseen by a board appointed by the governor.

As a result of efforts by the Green Justice Coalition, contractors for utilities must now pay living wages, offer benefits, and provide training opportunities. Nonetheless, Lisa says the implementation plan is somewhat vague. CLU and the Green Justice Coalition are working aggressively to make sure their issues are addressed in the plan. Already, the coalition has won a seat on the oversight board.

Lisa says CLU has identified barriers to its inclusion and offered solutions to removing those barriers. For example, job openings on green projects were not well publicized in communities where CLU members live and work, so CLU recommended that utilities rely on trusted community organizations to spread the word.

As another example, individual utility customers who wanted to install energy-saving insulation or air seals had to pay the entire fee for the work in advance before they could begin to enjoy reduced energy bills.



Photo courtesy of CLU

Green Justice Coalition members gather at a hearing of the State Energy Advisory Council.



Photo courtesy of CLU

Green Justice Coalition members at a hearing.

CLU noted that lower-income ratepayers were effectively locked out of the retrofits, because they did not have the cash needed to pay for the changes up front.

The solution CLU suggested is being tested through pilot projects and a new financing mechanism: lower-income customers can use grants to cover their upfront costs and finance the remainder with the savings generated by the efficiencies.

CLU uses CCHD grants to help pay the salary for a community organizer. Lisa says, "We're successful because we have pulled together groups that have different self-interests into a coalition of unlikely allies with unique strengths. CCHD was instrumental in giving us the capacity to convene the coalition and extend our effectiveness from the city to the state level."

Community Labor United's Green Justice Coalition now includes more than 40 member organizations, including the BWA. Its successful models are being replicated in other parts of the state. Lisa says studying the issues, the industries, and the training required to participate in green contracts is key to CLU's ability to involve low-income people and communities of color in this burgeoning field.

Both BWA and CLU demonstrate that grassroots community-led groups can improve the lives of their members by passionate, steadfast engagement in the complex processes of governance and decision making. 