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Boston Living Center, hit by 2010 scandal, eyes renewal through merger with Victory Programs

Posted by Matt Rocheleau February 7, 2012 04:03 PM

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(Lisa Poole/Globe file/2007)

Damaris Cintron, of Somerville, right, had her makeup done by Scott Rich during a "Women's Day of Beauty" at the Boston Living Center.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

When the leader of the Boston Living Center was accused of embezzling more than \$100,000 from the nonprofit in 2010, staff and members at the organization had little time to absorb the news.

The shocking betrayal left the two-decade old organization – among the region's largest community centers for people living with HIV/AIDS – without an executive director and facing a possible shutdown.

But an emergency fund-raising campaign that drew an outpouring of support and raised more than a quarter of a million dollars bought the agency some time. Over the past six months, the organization has been able to balance its budget while negotiating a deal it hopes will be a permanent solution to not only save the center but also to improve its operations.

On March 1, the [Boston Living Center](#) will officially merge with [Victory](#)

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Programs, a 37-year-old nonprofit based near the South End and Roxbury border. Victory Programs provides housing and support services to homeless people and families struggling with addiction and chronic conditions, including HIV/AIDS.

Under the arrangement unanimously approved by each board last month, BLC will continue to operate the center along Stanhope Street, where it moved to 17 years ago. There will be no cuts to services, programming or the 170 staff employed at both agencies combined.

But shared resources, consolidated administrations, and the integration of the two organizations' complementary offerings will help cut costs and improve the number of and quality of services each can offer.

After more than a year of uncertainty, the move is a major milestone for the 1,400 active of a total 8,000 members BLC currently serves, all of whom have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, including 46-year-old Worcester-native Scott Galinsky, a board member for the center.

"We fit together perfectly," he said of the two organizations.

Diagnosed with HIV a decade ago and a drug abuser for most of his life until he went into rehabilitation for his crystal methamphetamine addiction in 2005, Galinsky said he has experienced how the center can change lives.

Fighting years of feeling "ashamed" about his virus, he became a member shortly after moving to Boston to be closer to his doctor.

"I could talk about it all day," he said by phone Monday. "The Living Center for me saved my life. It just opened its arms to me and loved me when I could not love myself. It's an amazingly magic place."

Galinsky credits the center with helping him stay sober since he joined. He's made close friends there. He's grown more comfortable with his diagnosis of a virus that, on average takes 10 or more years to turn into AIDS.

The disease that plagues low- and middle-income countries has killed more than 25 million people worldwide, including 615,000 out of 1.7 million in the U.S. estimated to have been infected with HIV, since the first cases were reported 20 years ago, according to the Center Disease Control and Prevention

That federal health agency also estimates that someone in the United State is infected with HIV every nine-and-a-half minutes, making organizations like the BLC a continued “anchor for hundreds living with HIV/AIDS who rely on its meals program and peer support everyday,” Victory Programs’ president and CEO Jonathan Scott said.

“No one wanted to see the Center close because of one person’s illicit activities,” he continued. “When approaching a merger, Victory Programs considers two levels of benefits: financial and social—this merger has both.”

And the organization Scott leads is well-versed in mergers. Since restructuring to become an “umbrella agency” two-and-a-half decades ago, it has now merged with 14 different entities that make up as many of the nonprofit’s 17 program offerings in Boston and one other in Cambridge.

Four of Victory Programs’ mergers, counting the one with BLC, happened within the past six years.

“The leadership at Victory Programs understands what it takes to form strategic alliances,” said a statement from Mayor Thomas M. Menino. “This merger is a win-win. Not only does it bring two of Boston’s great nonprofits together under Victory Programs, but it also enables a critical resource for people living with HIV/AIDS to remain open.”

Scott said that BLC will receive an immediate benefit from the merger when Victory Programs’ team of HIV/AIDS housing and supportive services specialists move their offices into the center, which will also have a healthy food program integrated into its important meals service. He said Victory Programs’ hopes to tap into BLC’s “phenomenal volunteer component.”

While there are some people who are members of both organizations, already, there are many others who belong to just one or the other, Galinsky said. With the merger, he hopes more of the respective memberships will utilize the offerings at both agencies.

In addition to fighting HIV/AIDS, the organizations both emphasize community, wellness and nutrition; access to housing and job training; and a devotion to meeting Boston’s emerging health needs, officials said.

BLC had been considering the idea of merging for several years, according to Galinsky. The embezzlement scandal that began unfolding 17 months ago, forced the agency to act.

“We weren’t going to close the very next day,” he said. But, “The situation was dire.”

The center, which operates on a budget of about \$1.6 million annually, was behind on its payroll and payments to vendors. And, regular donors became more reluctant to contribute.

An emergency fund-raising campaign last spring raised over \$250,000 to help cover immediate costs and pay for some of the restitutions for employees and vendors who were victims of the former directors’ embezzlement.

In the months after the successful fund-raising effort, Victory Programs and the center entered a management agreement. With money from the Catalyst Fund, which supports collaborative ventures among nonprofits, the two agencies, which receive a majority of revenue from public funding, began talks of a more complete alliance.

In the process of negotiating a merger, Victory Programs, which operates on a budget of about \$10 million per year, helped BLC finish paying off restitutions, including retirement account interest, and put into place a series of checks and balances to prevent future fraud.

Two months ago, the center’s former director, Valerie Tebbetts pleaded guilty to charges of embezzling more than \$100,000 from the organization due to a gambling problem. She was sentenced to five years of probation, during which she is expected to attend Gamblers Anonymous meetings, stay away from casinos and lottery games, and pay \$123,500 in restitution to the center – none of which has been received, yet, according to Scott.

“The trial they’ve gone through this past year ... It does make it very, very hard for the volunteer board left behind,” said Scott.

Despite the scandal and financial troubles, members were largely shielded from any negative impacts, officials said. Services at the Boston Living Center were not interrupted for a single day, Galinsky said.

And, though the deal has helped BLC avoid potential closure, that was never the focus of the merger for Victory Programs, Scott said.

“We’re not about saving organizations,” he said. “We’re about finding important organizations in the community and building a synergy and a stronger organization around that.”

“They have their own identity and mission and own importance in their community and that’s what we don’t want to lose.”

E-mail Matt Rocheleau at mjrochele@gmail.com.

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