

Dorchester Reporter

"The News and Values Around the Neighborhood"

All Contents © Copyright 2004, Boston Neighborhood News, Inc.

Shrinking Budgets Compel Non-Profits to Team Up

December 2, 2004

By **Jim O'Sullivan**
News Editor

On Saturday night, the floor-to-ceiling dividers that sometimes split the ballroom in UMass-Boston's new student center into three separate halls will pull back, and a thousand people will pour in. Food stations will offer steaming delicacies from around the globe, six-year-olds without permanent homes will mingle with regional bank executives, and six local not-for-profit organizations will raise the hundreds of thousands of dollars they say they need to bring a broad range of human services to thousands of Bostonians.

The "Celebrating Community Gems" fundraiser represents a cooperation technique that increasing numbers of area non-profits are using to negotiate a hostile financial landscape that has gutted or destroyed several of their peers. By pooling resources, the social service agencies that pack the Dorchester community, and help drive the local economy, are finding creative ways to deliver keep themselves relevant- and solvent. "I think people are starting to really recognize the importance of collaborating with one another, and that's because we're all kind of doing the same types of things, and if we want to continue to have the impact that we're having, and reach more people, it really makes sense to work collaboratively," said Marisa Coleman, coordinator of Social Capital Inc. Dorchester, a networking initiative itself the product of a partnership upon a partnership.

Terry Lane, vice president for programming at the Boston Foundation, calls the arrangements "strategic alliances" and said they are necessary for non-profits when "their revenue streams have been constricted for a whole host of resources." Lane pointed to the formal partnership between the Codman Square Health Center and the Dorchester House Multi-Service Center as an industry paradigm that allows the two neighborhood institutions to combine revenue, expertise, and personnel in a way that benefits both.

"I think the characteristics of projects that go well is when organizations have a common goal that they want to achieve," Lane said. "It's different when they are in competition with one another."

When he was running the Log School on Bowdoin St., Larry Mayes, now director of health and human services for the City of Boston, even diverted funds from his own agency to another, Saint Peter Church, despite resistance from his board directors, because he thought the parish was in sorer need.

"I felt that if they were going to help shoulder the burden of what was going on in Bowdoin-Geneva," Mayes said, "then they needed the resources." In turn, he said, nuns at St. Peter's helped tutor students enrolled in Log School sports programs.

Stingier budgets have forced increased collaboration, Mayes said. "I think, as the state budgets have been cut the last few years, we've really seen a running into each others' arms, if you will."

Organizers of the "Community Gems" fundraiser say the cooperative model is serving them well in its maiden venture. Karen Caple, a development official at the United Homes for Children - which offers services from foster care for special needs children to teen mother mentoring programs - said each of the six agencies will raise upwards of \$25,000 from the one-night event.

"In and of ourselves, we could not have raised this kind of money. We needed the resources of every agency," Caple said, adding that the donations will help cover shortfalls in state funding that typically lead to the elimination of administrative positions.

Recently, several Dorchester non-profits have downsized, cut services, or closed for business all together. The Strand Theatre was wrested from the hands of the non-profit group that had operated it for 25 years, when the city alleged that the facility, which it owns, was being mismanaged by the M. Harriet

McCormack Center for the Arts. Last year, Beth Israel-Deaconess Hospital closed the Little House Health Center on Dorchester Ave., citing revenue shortfalls. Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses, an umbrella organization that oversees many local social service agencies had to sell two of its properties to pay down a growing debt. In February, the Columbia Point Community Partnership cited a harsh fiscal climate for its own disbanding, despite the involvement of local heavy-hitters like UMass-Boston, the Boston Globe, Boston College High School, the JFK Library, and the Corcoran-Jennison Companies. The Strand, currently managed by the city, could still be limping along under McCormack control if it had capitalized on the chances to share resources with other non-profits, said Juan Everteze, former president of the board of the now-defunct McCormack Center.

"I think it would've probably helped if that had been available to us at that time," Everteze said Tuesday, calling the staff's ability to reach out to other groups "extremely limited" by more pressing duties. Everteze said the former Strand management could have benefited from cooperative practices like payroll services, bulk purchasing, and access to emergency revenue during dire times.

So, collaborate or die? Even some of these organizations asked for or offered help, so it's not a cure-all. But the upside of splitting both duties and resources offer avenues for non-profits to dodge the pitfalls that have toppled or wounded some of their brethren.

The Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation thrives on such partnerships, said executive director Jeanne DuBois. By splitting fees, overhead reimbursement, and staff time with Viet-AID, she said, the organization has been able to build 20 new homes worth nearly \$4 million. The cooperation cut down on the cost for each organization, and sprung personnel to work on other projects.

Working with 11 other community development corporations across the city on assistance and loan programs, she said, has allowed all the CDCs to take advantage of local relationships each enjoys and raise money for lead-lending projects.

The shared efforts have become especially vital in years when the Uphams Corner-based group reports a 30 percent decline in government and foundation grants.

SCI-Dorchester was birthed earlier this year, the non-profit lovechild of Social Capital Inc., a Woburn-based civic programming initiative, and DotWell, itself the collaboration of the Health Services Partnership between Codman Square Health Center and Dorchester House. Coleman, the programming coordinator, said the already-crowded non-profit community doesn't need another replicating presence, but rather, a "convening" one. The SCI-Dorchester Youth Council brings together teens from local youth organizations and cross-pollinates. "Already," said youth coordinator Ivan Hauck, "we've had students get involved with an organization they probably wouldn't have heard of without this resource-sharing and collaboration." One youngster working with the Salvation Army came to a Youth Council event, heard about Bold Teens, and joined their anti-smoking effort.

That type of "altruistic spirit," as Mayes phrased it, can occasionally run into hard realities, as partnerships often fail, usually victims of conflicting interests or low funding. "If the expectation is for quick cost-savings," said Lane, "I'm not sure that always happens. And that can be disappointing." Further, she said, disagreements often arise over divisions of labor.

But when the plan works, as it seems to be working for the Community Gems, notwithstanding a few other agencies that fell by the wayside as a result of an organizational workload they couldn't handle, the result can be a happy synergy. The six non-profits pooled their mailing lists, and drew on the connections of staff, board members, volunteers, and clients - all of whom are invited to the event.

Caple said, "We were able to share contacts: 'Oh, I know so-and-so at Sovereign,' or 'I know somebody at KeySpan.' One agency only has a few contacts, but when we put our heads together, we have a lot of contacts."

They taught each other teleconferencing. The Roxbury Multi-Service Center produced the programs, United Homes handled the decorations, La Alianza Hispania managed data entry and mailing lists. And the teamwork appealed to potential financial backers. "That was the way we presented it: You're not giving to one, you're giving to six. And that made it a nicer sell," Caple said.

"What funders really want to see is: Is there communication happening with all the groups?" Coleman said.

"They want to know why you're not talking with each other, particularly if you're practically neighbors."

But talking they are, locally and increasingly, just as they will on Saturday night on Columbia Point. "It's going to be an incredible event," Caple said. "Nothing like it."