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Innovation Grantees tackle issues of housing, hunger and educator diversity.
$341,000 of funding granted to further propel three “outside the box” projects

SPRINGFIELD, MA – The Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts’ (CFWM) Innovation Grant Program has awarded a total of $341,000 to three changemaking nonprofit organizations to continue creating innovative solutions around these critical issues facing our region. CFWM’s Innovation Grant Program was launched in 2016 to encourage nonprofits to develop and execute novel ideas in partnership with other entities, as well as allow organizations to construct inventive solutions with measurable impact.

In January of 2018, CFWM awarded first year funding to Five Colleges Incorporated, The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts and Pioneer Valley Habitat for Humanity to implement innovative projects that were refined and tested during a planning period in 2017. Now entering their third year of funding, these grantees are seeing the tangible impact of their work. Twenty paraprofessionals of color are making their way toward receiving their licensure to become a full-fledged teachers; food insecure patients are being identified and referred to healthy food opportunities; and small homes have been built and are being occupied by first time homebuyers.

Five Colleges, Inc. will continue to develop the “Paradigm Shift” initiative and bring in new partners. This initiative is focused on creating a more diverse teacher workforce in Western Massachusetts by helping para-educators of color overcome obstacles to obtaining licensure to become teachers in area schools. The 25+ member organizations that make up the Paradigm Shift Coalition have laid the groundwork for breaking down barriers that para-educators face, including identifying the steps involved in obtaining licensure and the types of individualized support participants need, helping enroll para-educators in courses in local colleges, and providing mentoring and tutoring for MTEL tests. The coalition has also been able to offset costs associated with these steps to help make it affordable through its partnership with local colleges. A key success in 2019 was Paradigm Shift’s convening of 113 district and school administrators from Holyoke and Springfield for a day-long professional development
opportunity to gain knowledge and skills for building a diverse teacher workforce, such as
recruitment and hiring practices. Paradigm Shift currently has 33 participants enrolled in the
program, and they are on target for graduating at least 20 by the end of 2020 (and the
remaining 13 in 2021).

The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts will spend their third year expanding and analyzing
the impact of their Food Insecurity Screening and Referral Initiative that conducts and tracks
food insecurity screening and social service referrals at the Holyoke Health Center and their
Chicopee location. Additionally, they will partner with West Mass Elder Care and Springfield
Senior Services to address the food needs of patients who screen positive for food insecurity
and have a specific medical condition. With a simple in-person questionnaire, the initiative
screens for food insecurity at adult and pediatric practices, and then connects patients with
food assistance resources—and, equally important—referrals to additional resources that
patients may need, such as housing, employment, education, etc. These referrals are tracked in
a database which allows for follow-up with patients to identify any changes in behavior and
additional needs.

Pioneer Valley Habitat for Humanity will continue with a third year of their “Big Enough: The
Small Home Revolution in Western Mass” initiative, which aims to launch more individuals and
families into the middle class by empowering them to become first-time owners of small
simple, affordable, energy-efficient homes. Pioneer Valley Habitat for Humanity’s work brings
together partners such as local banks to conceive creative financing, cities to implement new
zoning regulations, and builders to design small, innovative and energy-efficient housing
concepts, as well as to pilot modular construction and alternative land use models. The first two
years of funding allowed for three low-income families to become homeowners in Hampshire
County, a dream that likely wouldn’t have been possible within the current housing market.
Over this third year, two more sites will be developed in Northampton and Pelham and Habitat
will share its learnings to that other areas can look at adopting these innovative strategies.

About the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts

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charitable endowment consisting of over 600 separately identified funds ($173 million) serving
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