

YOUTH INNOVATION CENTER

by Making Opportunity Count (MOC)

Region 1 • Fitchburg, Massachusetts
mocinc.org



Children • Technology • Job Training • Immigrants

INITIATIVE OVERVIEW

Making Opportunity Count (MOC) is building a youth innovation and creative space at the former Cleghorn Neighborhood Center in the Gateway City of Fitchburg, Massachusetts that will provide access to technology, resources, and programs, like a media maker lab and an art studio, including drawing tablets and 3D printers. The project's aim is to develop critical skills needed to compete in a 21st-century workforce and help youth build lasting relationships in a supportive environment.

LOCAL NEED ADDRESSED BY INITIATIVE

In 2019, the Center's goal was to address high rates of transiency, unemployment, low wages, and low educational attainment within a community home to a high number of immigrants and Latinos. The Center targeted at-risk, emerging adults aged 13-24 who live in Fitchburg, with a specific focus on youth living in the Cleghorn neighborhood.

MOC and Three Pyramids, a local Black-led organization, have identified an opportunity to address some of the critical challenges facing the young people in our community and are working together to address these needs through the reimagining of the former Cleghorn Youth Center. Needs identified include:

- Youth in low-income families have less access to technology and resources than their more affluent peers, which leads to unbalanced opportunities for future life and career success.
- Youth need less rigid educational spaces. Traditional school environments with



structured curriculum do not give students enough opportunities to uncover what they are passionate to learn about.

- A lack of youth-accessible social spaces outside the home and school environment can lead to inappropriate and unhealthy behaviors.
- A key driver of youth success is financial literacy. This space will host Three Pyramids financial literacy and mentorship programs, with a focus on supporting low-income youth and people of color in north central Massachusetts.
- Marginalized communities and low-income families have historically had less access to cultural institutions like museums and opportunities to be involved with arts and cultural programming.

After George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020 and the following social unrest swept the country, the City of Fitchburg engaged in its own race equity and "Black Lives Matter" conversations. Fitchburg's racial equity

work was led by POC-led organizations, but, unlike many other communities, these efforts were supported by, and coordinated with the Mayor's Office and Police Department. Youth played an integral role and continue to be involved in an ongoing community-level discussion regarding racial equity.

As a result of these community conversations and internal discussions with Three Pyramids, MOC has decided to reshape its scope of this project to focus more specifically on youth of color in Fitchburg. We believe that it is imperative that this Center provide focused resources for a population that have been oppressed and structurally precluded from accessing many community benefits.

To ensure that we are doing this in the most authentic way, MOC has adjusted the scope of the Center's operational plan. Three Pyramids will operate within the Youth Innovation Center. The Youth Innovation Center will have a primary focus on youth of color. At the same time, our previous vision for the Center remains, with an intentional shift in marketing, recruitment, and hiring practices to welcome and encourage youth of color.

ROLE OF CSBG FUNDS

CSBG funds have been used to support consulting costs related to facilitating youth focus groups. These focus groups presented numerous challenges and it was critical they were conducted by an individual with significant experience in this area. CSBG funds will also support ongoing operational expenses of the Center.

TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT

We have a vision that all youth in north central Massachusetts grow up to achieve economic stability, career success, and personal fulfillment while taking an active role in their community. We believe if we provide access to resources that enable exploration and learning, youth can uncover what motivates them to succeed. Many of the Center's programs, outlined below, strive to do just that.

Homework Center & Financial Literacy Programs

The Center strives to provide at-risk youth a safe environment where they have access to homework assistance and educational resources. Additionally, Financial Literacy programs support economic mobility for youth in underinvested communities.

Media Maker Lab

The Media Maker Lab opens access pathways for youth and young adults in Fitchburg to explore their interests in everything from podcasting to developing virtual reality experiences.

Physical to Digital Art Studio

Creative expression through art leads to new innovations, celebrates culture, and creates opportunities for young people to uncover their passions. From physical mediums like painting, clay sculpture, and illustration to bringing that art into the digital world through graphic design, 3D printing, and more, students have resources at their fingertips to truly explore, create, and discover.

Life Coaching & Mentorship

Tapping into one's passions and charting a path for your future career is overwhelming. Youth and young adults often are not provided the resources or mentorship to learn about the different types of industries and job roles that intersect with their interests – our space connects youth to mentors focused on helping them realize their aspirations.

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EVIDENCE-BASED OUTCOMES

As a partner in the Tri-City Anti-Gang Partnership funded by the Shannon Grant, MOC is tuned in to the dangers that exist for this age group. Youth criminal activity, drug use and gang violence continue to impact Fitchburg. Based on data from the

Massachusetts State Police Crime Reporting Unit, from 2012-2016 simple assaults committed by 14-24 year-olds have declined in the city, however, aggravated assaults have seen a slight increase. In 2017, Fitchburg had the second highest violent crime aggregate in Worcester County. The city continues to see significant rates of robberies, larceny, theft, drug use, overdoses and disturbance calls. Further, we're seeing little movement in a graduation rate that, at 77%, is considerably lower than the state average of 88%.

We have developed the Youth Innovation Center in alignment with a number of community-wide strategic plans. The Center aims to increase engagement among a target population in ways that will strengthen their education, workforce and personal growth. This aligns with a Core Goal of the Fitchburg's Economic Development Strategic Plan: growing the city's educational sector in order to provide residents and students of all ages with the skills to compete successfully for today's jobs and those of the future. The partnership believes that innovation and alternative opportunities are one of the most effective ways to foster engagement among youth, especially those disengaged in traditional academic experiences.

As a result of community conversations, structural racism and racial equity have become a more deliberate focuses for the Youth Innovation Center.

Among their priorities, the Massachusetts Latino Advisory Commission's 2018 Report identifies two goals: (1) Improving the educational performance and pathways for success for Latino students and (2) advancing the competitiveness of the Latino workforce and businesses. Given the neighborhood's predominant Latino population, we believe the Youth Innovation Center aligns well with the Commission's recommendation to provide workforce development programs that prepare more Latinos for successful employment and expand career pathways for high school and secondary education students.

Further, the Tri-City Anti-Gang Partnership's community risk assessment and strategic plan offered five new action items, one of which resonates with our initiative: "Involve young people in the design and development of youth programs to create programs that resonate with young people and enhance outreach and engagement efforts."

As we are still in the process of data collection and program development due to delays (COVID, supply chain, and unforeseen structural damage), the only evidence base we can discuss is related to continued need, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent data found that:

- After-school programming, employment, and education and training were identified as three of the top four community needs in our area in 2020.
- 60.2% of Fitchburg High School students are considered economically-disadvantaged, compared to 36.6% in the state.
- Since COVID, families of color have experienced disproportionately higher unemployment, higher rates of depression and anxiety, higher food insecurity, and are more behind on rent.
- 22% of Fitchburg's youth live in poverty, more than 1.6 times the statewide rate.
- COVID-related studies show that low- to moderate-income families of color were less able to access a device or reliable internet for remote learning.

EQUITY LENS

As mentioned above, as a result of community conversations, structural racism and racial equity have become more deliberate focuses of this space. Prior to the death of George Floyd, MOC held a community wide discussion on racial equity in Fitchburg. It was apparent during that event that racism and leadership opportunities for people of color needed to become more of a focus in Fitchburg.

Youth have been directly involved in this project since conception and, taking part in a "founders' group" solely made up of young adults. Those youth represented MOC at the City of Fitchburg's CDBG

hearings to express the importance of this type of space on their lives.

Considering the success of the Youth Founders Group, we identified a need for youth to have a space where they can gather, organize, and be connected to resources that amplify their ability to get involved in racial and social justice efforts and other community engagement activities.

CUSTOMER VOICE

The Center's Youth Leadership Board is comprised of 12 young adults ranging in age from 16-21. The youth on the board are representative of the youth in our community; nearly all are Hispanic (11) and 10 speak Spanish. At concept, we noted that the best way to create a space that youth are drawn to was to ask them what they wanted. We identified youth in our programs that met the age and diversity we were seeking to lead this effort, and we requested their participation. They have supported the initial concept and design sessions led by a third-party consultant, and they continued to work with our Youth Programs Director on their leadership development to be best positioned to lead this initiative upon opening. The Board has also taken a leadership role in major decisions shaping the Youth Innovation Center, including:

- **Fundraising:** The youth participate in supporting the fundraising efforts around the Youth Innovation Center by being the voices and faces of the project.
- **Marketing:** The youth participated in multiple sessions with our senior director of advancement to determine the branding of the Youth Innovation Center with a focus on color palette and narrative.
- **Program Development:** Since concept, youth have helped us to define the space and decide what should happen behind the doors. Core programs have been based on youth interest and feedback, and include racial equity, social justice, digital arts, audio and video production, studio and performance art.
- **Design:** After progress was halted because of COVID, the Youth Founders resumed monthly meetings and are re-engaged in the finishes and furnishing of the space.

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