

# The Road to Citizenship Starts Here



**W**hat a visitor encounters in a third floor classroom in Valley Opportunity Council's Mt. Carmel Avenue offices in Chicopee every Thursday evening looks very much like the "face of the world." About 18 people, each from a different corner of the globe, participate in a ten-week class designed to prepare them for the interview and test they must successfully complete in order to become citizens of the United States.



*Celebrating Valley Opportunity Council's continuum  
of services and supports • 2016*



## From the Executive Director

### *Investing in People, Making Stronger Communities*

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This year's Valley Opportunity Council annual report celebrates many of the programs and people that make our work so vital in the service area we occupy. Our Citizenship class featured on the cover may be small in comparison to VOC's fuel assistance, early education and nutrition programs, but it represents a powerful example of how VOC is achieving our mission of "providing opportunity" to our neighbors in the region.

VOC started the Citizenship class to address a need and, while fuel assistance to low-income families is one of our primary functions, we also need to be nimble enough to address needs as they arise in helping those we serve...helping them rise out of poverty.

One area that continues to grow is the need for stable and affordable housing. All of the work we do to sustain families and grow opportunities for them is at risk if they can't find stable, safe housing they can afford.

VOC has worked toward a full range of housing opportunities for moderate and low-income families and individuals. VOC currently owns and self-manages eighteen properties throughout the Holyoke and Chicopee area. All properties are owned and managed by VOC, which also does all marketing, tenant selection, qualifying and leasing. Our housing department consists of a Director of Housing, Property Manager, administrative assistant, administrative accounting support and three maintenance workers.

As early as 1989 VOC began acquiring and rehabilitating housing for those in need. The Chicopee Lodging House on Front Street in Chicopee was one of the first housing initiatives for VOC and provides 21 units for homeless individuals.

Just this past year VOC acquired Voces de Esperanza, two residential buildings located on Franklin and Chestnut Streets in Holyoke, due to financial difficulties experienced by the previous owners that also included part ownership by the tenant association. VOC is now managing and improving the housing and has been able to maintain a tenant stake in the properties.

Also in 2016 VOC assumed ownership of The Kendall—the former HAPHousing property located in the heart of Chicopee Center, across from Chicopee City Hall.

The property is currently under construction and will be converted from 38 residential units with shared bathrooms and a kitchen to 41 studio apartments, each with their own kitchen and bathroom.

We list our growing portfolio on pages 6 and 7 of this report. With so much of VOC's funding tied to federal and state government sources, the investment in both affordable housing and commercial property makes a contribution to building stronger communities and, at the same time, helps assure a strong financial footing for the organization.

As VOC continues to adjust to meet needs and provide opportunity for our youngest citizens, to those aspiring to be citizens and those needing a wide range of VOC services including nutrition and fuel assistance, it is important we celebrate those who make our work happen.

My thanks to our Board, our senior and program managers and all who work for VOC to improve the lives of the individuals and families we serve.



  
Steve Huntley  
Executive Director  
Valley Opportunity Council



Helena Dixon

**“The best part of my job is knowing when those I teach become U.S. citizens.”**

The road to U.S. citizenship is not easy and the interview and test aspiring citizens must pass is rendered as part of a one-on-one interview with a U.S. Immigration officer. It is comforting for members of this VOC class that the woman teaching the course has walked in the same shoes as her students.

While VOC’s Citizenship class is small, the impact to participants is life-changing.

For Helena Dixon, the journey that brought her to VOC where she serves as instructor of its Citizenship class started in Brazil. Today she lives in Ludlow, where, in addition to her career, she joins her husband, a native of New Jersey, as an active volunteer in the community. Little did Helena know that the pathway to becoming a U.S. citizen that included taking VOC’s Citizenship class would lead to her one day teaching that class.

After starting out as an elementary school teacher in Brazil, Helena followed her brother, who years earlier had emigrated to the United States. She admits that when she arrived in 1999 she was unable to speak many words beyond “thank you.” She says the transition to a new culture, a different language and unfamiliar food made her “feel like a toddler... there were so many tears.”

After first arriving in the United States, Helena lived in Somerville and worked in a variety of

domestic jobs to survive. She enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages and Adult Basic Education courses.

Helena moved to Western Massachusetts in 2008, during the economic downturn, and found it hard to secure a job. One evening, while taking a walk in Ludlow with her husband, she noticed a billboard that promoted the Ludlow Area Adult Learning Center, thinking that might offer more education and help her secure a job.

The rest, as the saying goes, is history.

Helena learned from representatives of the Ludlow Learning Center that their program was for those starting out on their journey to learn the language and that she was “too advanced” in her English to be a student, but that they needed volunteers in the classroom to help those just learning the language. She gladly accepted the offer to assist.

Since she was not yet a citizen, Helena looked for a citizenship class in which she could enroll. Encouraged “to start one” herself, she organized a class to help others on the road to citizenship as a volunteer. In 2012, VOC hired Helena to teach its Citizenship class.

Aspiring U.S. citizens must pass an interview, answering questions orally to a United States

Citizenship and Immigration Services representative. They must correctly answer 6 out of 10 random questions that cover American history, civics, geography and government. The questions are drawn from a list of 100, so aspiring citizens need to study all 100 questions— with many of them challenging for even natives of the United States.

VOC’s Citizenship class is the only one of its kind and the service is in high demand with a waiting list of 40. Jewish Family Services originally provided the resources to run the class, but that funding eventually expired. The need for and success of the program prompted VOC to utilize the Community Service Block Grant to continue offering the class.



Helena sees the life-changing aspect of the program firsthand. “The best part of my job is knowing when those I teach become U.S. citizens and to see them in the community. I can relate to their journey, having been there myself, and it is what drives me to help them.”

Today, Helena, who also earned a Bachelor’s degree from an online program along the way, wears many hats for VOC. In addition to teaching VOC’s Citizenship class she serves as VOC’s volunteer coordinator, is an Adult Basic Education advisor and a distance learning coach for VOC clients.

Helping others comes naturally for Helena—for her it is a full-circle experience. “The freedom and pride that I have—I want them to experience what I have as a citizen of the United States.”



# Mt. Carmel Home-Based Early Ed Opens



VOC operates five center-based early education and care programs, one of which is located at VOC's Chicopee administrative offices at 35 Mt. Carmel Avenue in Chicopee.

VOC also operates 75 family childcare homes in the region, where trained educators operate early education programming in their homes. The newest family care site is located at 56 Mt. Carmel Avenue, opened in December 2016, right across the street from VOC's administrative offices.

Nancy Vazquez, a native of Puerto Rico and a proud recipient of VOC's services when she moved to Chicopee in 2013, today serves as director of the Mt. Carmel family childcare program. The Mt. Carmel home she is living in with her husband and teenage son was acquired by VOC and renovated in 2016 to accommodate the new home-based early education program. VOC purchased the house for the express purpose of establishing a home-based early education provider, taking advantage of the synergy and proximity of VOC's center-based program across the street.

"I started as a program participant in an ESL class at VOC. I learned about the home-based childcare program, decided that was something I would love to do and received training from VOC. I love my job... I'm so happy here," Nancy says.

Five children are served in the home-based program Nancy manages, with students attending from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. five days a week. Children learn letters and words, have a rich literacy environment and learn to play and interact with each other.

In many ways, Nancy is the embodiment of VOC's mission to provide opportunity to all while helping them to achieve greater independence and a higher quality of life. At the same time, Nancy is helping to provide that for the children and families she serves every day on Mt. Carmel Avenue.



# Leadership Spotlight Flor Diaz—Promoting Healthy Families

Like so many of VOC's key administrative staff and leadership, Flor Diaz was a recipient of services provided by the agency before she became employed by VOC. Each of her three children benefited from the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program that is designed to provide nutritional supports and information to families with young children.

"I was a WIC mom, starting with my son who is now 21 years old and serving in the United States Navy. For the first five years of his life WIC was a big part of his growth. I can say to the families who use the program, 'if it worked for me and my family, it will work for you.'"

Flor has a 12 year-old daughter and a 5 year-old son, and each of her children has benefited from the WIC program. "It did wonders for them," she says. "The nutrition provided, the healthy recipes—I used those for my own children."

WIC provides important essential foods that infants and children need in order to develop properly, including milk, cheese and eggs. Through WIC, a child's iron and calcium levels as well as height and weight are checked. So, too, is the weight of mothers who have recently given birth. The goal is a healthy start for infants and children and their families.

Flor serves as Community Coordinator for WIC, which means she serves as the public face of WIC and VOC as she informs and engages people in the Holyoke and Chicopee service area about the benefits of the WIC program to young families.

There are many success stories among the VOC leadership, and Flor represents one of them. She started her career in human services, serving for nine years at the Gandara Center where she worked as a counselor in one of their residential programs. She is also a certified preschool teacher, having spent time in an early education classroom.

Flor joined VOC as an intake worker for the fuel assistance program and learned about an opening for a Family Support Coordinator position



in WIC. As a Family Support Coordinator, Flor saw the program from the perspective of helping families learn about and connect to the program.

Now, as Community Coordinator for WIC, Flor's job is to engage as many stakeholders as possible in spreading the word about the good that WIC can do for families. It's a big job and she finds herself traveling to Holyoke, Chicopee, Ludlow and Westfield, making contact with community organizations, elected officials and families in connecting young families and new mothers to the nutrition they need to thrive.

One of the challenges, Flor says, is that some people still don't know about WIC and the nutritional services it offers. "I still meet people who don't know about WIC and some say they aren't interested, so my job is to help them realize the importance of good nutrition for young families."

"If it wasn't for VOC and programs like WIC, I can't imagine what our community would look like. "

It is also hard to imagine VOC without talented and passionate leaders like Flor Diaz serving the agency and the community.

# VOC Properties

## Residential:

**1 Grant Street & 10 Meadow Street, Holyoke**  
Owned since and developed in 1991

**Chapin Mansion**  
**181 Elm Street, Holyoke**  
Owned since and developed in 1996

**Maguder House**  
**198-200 Chicopee Street, Chicopee**  
Owned since and developed in 1995

**1-3 Cottage Avenue, Holyoke**  
Owned since and developed in 1994

**Cabotville Common, Chicopee**  
**Building #1: Corner of Walter and Chicopee Street**  
**Building #2: Corner of Park and West Street**  
Owned since and developed in 1996

**Voces de Esperanza, Holyoke**  
**Building #1: 46-52 Franklin Street**  
**Building #2: 339-351 Chestnut Street**  
Owned since 2016, originally developed by Nueva Esperanza in 1996.

**912 Chicopee Street, Chicopee**  
Owned since and developed in 1997

**226 E. Main Street, Chicopee**  
Owned since and developed in 1994

**61-65 Maple Street, Chicopee**  
Owned since and developed in 1995

**Chicopee Lodging House**  
**288 Front Street, Chicopee**  
Owned since and developed in 1989

**Main Street Shelter**  
**317-319 Main Street, Holyoke**  
Owned since and developed in 1989

**2 Harrison Avenue, Holyoke**  
Owned since 2012, improvements are currently being made

**865 Hampden / 182 Pearl Street, Holyoke**  
Owned since 2012, improvements are currently being made

**6 Worcester Place, Holyoke**  
Owned since 2012, improvements are currently being made

**56-58 Mt Carmel Avenue, Chicopee**  
Acquired in 2014 and immediately rehabbed

**51 Maple Street, Chicopee**  
Duplex building that was bought in August 2016 and immediately renovated

**55 Maple Street, Chicopee**  
Duplex building that was bought in August 2016 and immediately renovated. All work was completed with VOC reserves

## Commercial:

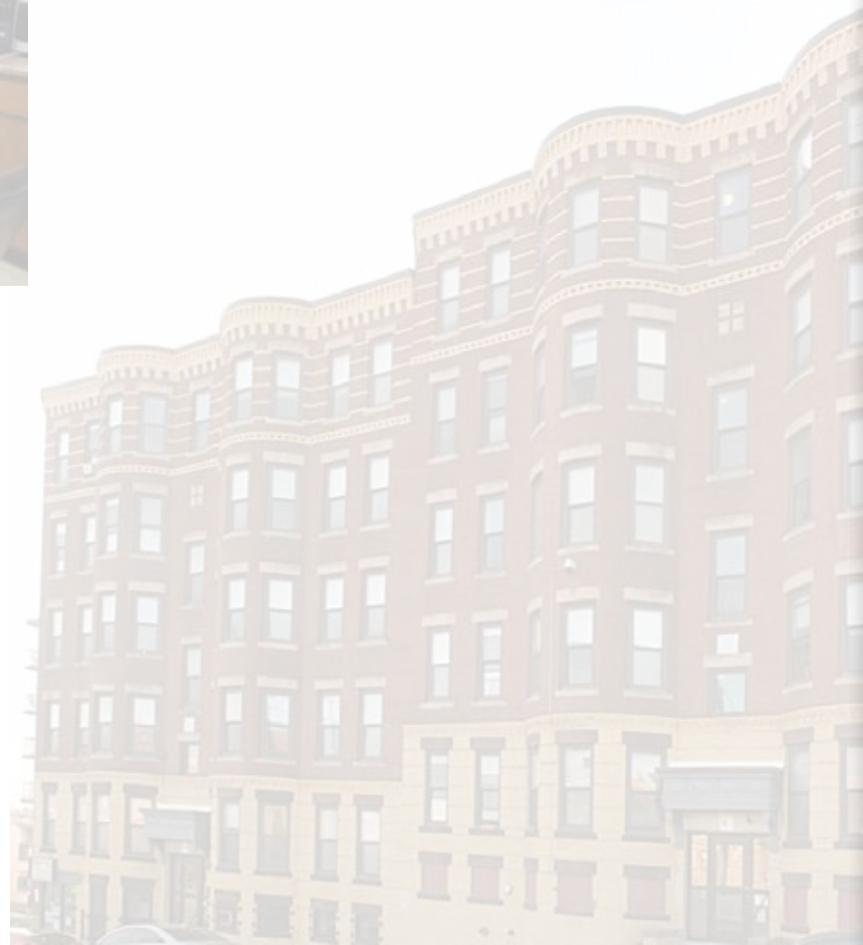
**516 Chicopee Street, Chicopee**  
Owned since 2008

**300 High Street, Holyoke**  
Owned since 1994

**35 Mt Carmel Ave, Chicopee**  
Owned since 2006, developed in 2007

**42-54 Center Street, Chicopee**  
Owned since 2011

**374 Montgomery Street, Chicopee**  
Owned since 2010



# 2017 Board of Directors

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# Our 2016 Financials

June 30, 2016

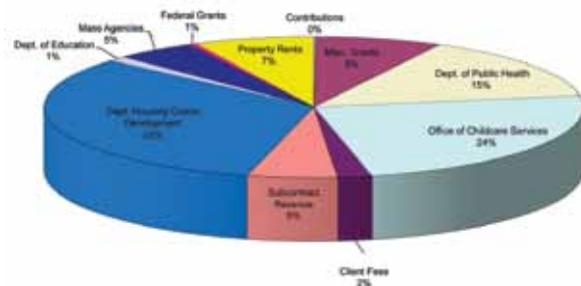
## ASSETS

Cash & Cash Equivalents	\$2,447,781
Accounts Receivable	1,721,125
Prepaid Expenses	114,993
Other Accounts Receivable	
Other Current Assets	84,780
<b>TOTAL CURRENT ASSETS</b>	<b>\$4,368,679</b>
Land, Buildings & Equipment	21,138,169
Accumulated Depreciation	(9,673,644)
<b>Net Land, Buildings &amp; Equipment</b>	<b>11,464,525</b>
Long-Term Investments	66,270
Other Assets	1,894,783
<b>TOTAL ASSETS</b>	<b>\$17,794,257</b>

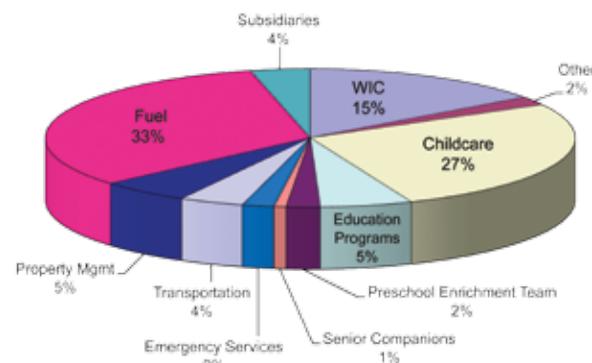
## LIABILITIES & NET ASSETS

Accounts Payable	1,058,470
Accrued Expenses	625,880
Current Notes Payable	
Current Portion of Long-Term Debt	790,481
Deferred Revenue	789,628
Other Current Liabilities	101,512
<b>TOTAL CURRENT LIABILITIES</b>	<b>\$3,365,971</b>
Long-Term Notes and Mortgage Payables	7,001,772
Other Liabilities	6,068,424
<b>TOTAL LIABILITIES</b>	<b>\$16,436,167</b>
Unrestricted Net Assets	1,358,090
<b>TOTAL LIABILITIES &amp; NET ASSETS</b>	<b>\$17,794,257</b>

**Source of Funds 2016**



**Use of Funds 2016**



# Valley Opportunity Council Programs

Available Services	Number of Participants Served
<b>Energy Assistance</b>	
Fuel Assistance (LIHEAP)	27,702
Heating System Repair/Replacement (HEARTWAP)	911
Emergency Utility Assistance	157 households
FEMA Rental and Utility Assistance	77 households
<b>College Access and Career Pathways</b>	
Educational Talent Search	241
Educational Opportunity Center	980
GEAR UP	1,714
Preschool Enrichment Team	1,550
<b>Income Management</b>	
Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA)	825 tax returns filed
<b>Youth Services</b>	
Cabot Manor After-School Program	52
Cabot Manor Summer Camp	30
Youth Employment	124
Mt. Carmel After-School Program	22
<b>Senior Services</b>	
Senior Companion Program	213 elders served
<b>Nutrition</b>	
Women, Infants & Children (WIC)	8,663
Food Stamps (SNAP)	490 applications processed
Summer Lunch	19,865 meals served
Chicopee Farmers' Market	14 vendors with 2,000-2,500 visitors
Good Food for Great Families	325 bags distributed
<b>Adult Education</b>	
Adult Basic Education	122
English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	119
Career Pathways	31
Citizenship Classes	13
ESOL and Family Literacy Project	8
<b>Transportation</b>	
Transportation	432
<b>Housing</b>	
Main Street Shelter	181
Scattered Site Supportive Housing	25
Veteran Single Room Occupancy	14 rooms
Property Management	124 units owned and managed
<b>Early Education and Child Care</b>	
Center Based	841
Home Based	1,000
Preschool Expansion Grant	39



**Valley Opportunity Council**  
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 (413) 552-1554 • [www.valleyopp.com](http://www.valleyopp.com)





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35 Mt. Carmel Avenue • Chicopee, MA 01013

