

# Bold Action for an Equitable Recovery

*FY21 Annual Report (July 2020 – June 2021)*

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Dear Friends,

The work of advancing racial and economic justice is never easy. Too often, opportunities that enable some of us to get ahead are set up in ways that require others to be left behind. This is true of so many of our systems. And it's been especially true of the added strain that the ongoing pandemic has placed on systems that weren't designed with all of us in mind.

That's why I'm particularly grateful for all the work that the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development (OWD) and its partners have done in the past year to address racial and economic disparities in our city—captured in this year's annual report, *Bold Action for an Equitable Recovery*.

In Fiscal Year 2021, in the face of extraordinary challenges, OWD distributed \$16.9 million to more than 120 community organizations, prioritizing training and education programs that empowered residents to pursue secure and satisfying careers. To prioritize community health and safety, many of these programs reinvented themselves to deliver services remotely. Youth Options Unlimited (YOU)—OWD's program for at-risk young people—even found innovative ways to deliver equipment and materials to young people to ensure they could continue developing hands-on career skills from the safety of their homes.

Recognizing that a healthy workforce is a strong workforce, OWD partnered with public health organizations—including the MIRA Coalition and the Boston Public Health Commission—to support workers sharing key public health guidance with residents. The connections that OWD has built with the public health sector are important and timely, and they represent our broader commitment to a holistic approach to workforce development. From quality healthcare and education to fair housing, child care, food security, and reliable low-cost transportation—the path to an equitable recovery from this pandemic will require partnership.

Together, we have an opportunity to go beyond a return to the way things were and, instead, build a better system that works for all of us. I am so proud of all that OWD has accomplished in the past year. And I hope that as you read about all that we've done, you'll join me in looking forward to everything that we can do.

**Sincerely,**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michelle Wu". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Michelle Wu**  
**Mayor, City of Boston**



Dear colleagues,

I am pleased to share with you our Fiscal Year 2021 report, Bold Action for an Equitable Recovery. While the past year has been a challenging time for our staff, partners, and most of all, Boston's workers, our collective accomplishments show what is possible when we come together with the common goal of creating a more equitable workforce.

Our mission at the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development (OWD) is to ensure the full participation of all Boston residents in the City of Boston's economic vitality and future. Enacting that mission during the pandemic has required nimble and varied approaches. In some instances, it has meant adapting long-running programs with strong track records of success. The Boston Tax Help Coalition, for example, converted its free tax preparation services to a remote delivery model, completing nearly 10,000 tax returns that resulted in \$16.8 million in refunds returned to low- and middle-income taxpayers.

In other instances, OWD designed new programming to meet the unique needs of workers during the pandemic. The Mayor's Office of Financial Empowerment (OFE) launched its Financial Navigators program, for example, to provide over-the-phone financial guidance to residents facing mounting economic difficulties, resulting in over 2,000 outbound referrals. As remote work became more mainstream, OFE also launched a Bridge to Digital Literacy class to equip job-seekers with the computer skills they'd need in an ever more digital workspace.

As this report shows, these are but a few of the advances we've made together in the past year.

The outcomes – more trained workers, more educational pathways, more skills advancement for English-language learners – are every bit a result of a team effort.

We look forward to fulfilling Mayor Wu's vision of an educated and empowered workforce in the new economy, and making Boston an equitable, world-class city for all. Under her leadership we will continue our efforts to assist job-seekers of all ages and backgrounds. This essential work would not be possible without our many collaborators – job training programs, career centers, educators, and policy partners – who have joined us. Without you, none of the strides of the past year would have been possible.

**In commitment,**

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'TN' followed by a long horizontal flourish.

**Trinh Nguyen**  
**Director, Mayor's Office of Workforce Development**





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# Introduction

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Unprecedented challenge demands bold response. In this FY21 annual report, we highlight programs and personal stories from a year of pandemic that exemplify the bold action required to *adapt* with changing circumstances, *connect* in spite of technological obstacles, and *commit* to a better future for our workforce.

Even so, this report represents only a fraction of Boston's broader workforce development efforts. Over the past year, the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development and its partners have also worked day-in and day-out on such initiatives as children's savings accounts for kindergartners, banking access for underbanked residents, legal assistance with sealing and expunging CORI records, training pipelines for careers with the City of Boston, early childhood literacy programming, and compliance with living wage regulations. This is in addition to the many job training, education, and support services provided by our grantees – the organizations that form the fabric of community life in both crisis and calm. When it comes to Boston's workforce, boldness is never a maverick action, but the mobilization of many dedicated people working together.

**Learn more at [owd.boston.gov](http://owd.boston.gov).**



# Adaptation

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## **Delivering tax refunds to families who need them most**



A point of pride for the Boston Tax Help Coalition – which provides free tax preparation for low-and middle-income workers – has long been its 30-plus partner tax sites conveniently dispersed throughout Boston's neighborhoods. Eligible taxpayers could easily bring in their documents, sit down with an IRS-certified volunteer preparer, and ask questions while their preparer hunted down every penny they were due.

This tax season, the Coalition was challenged with re-inventing the process they'd streamlined over the course of 20 years. Within a matter of months, they organized a virtual tax preparation system by which residents could upload their documents to an IRS-backed platform and meet with their volunteer

preparer over the phone. For residents who did not have the technology to upload their paperwork, the Coalition arranged a series of sites for intake and document drop-off. In this way, the Coalition succeeded in completing nearly 10,000 tax returns, resulting in \$16.8 million in refunds returned to taxpayers. The Coalition also conducted approximately 350 Financial Check-Ups – individualized financial assessments designed to improve credit.

## East Boston adult education program improvises and improves along with its students

**3,000**  
adult education students  
enrolled in Adult Literacy  
Initiative programs

For more than 30 years, East Boston Harborside Community School (EBHCS) has been a life-changing institution for Boston's immigrant communities. The largest part-time adult education program in the city, EBHCS serves more than 300 students a year in its many night classes – English as a Second Language, family literacy, high school equivalency, and native language literacy – without having to advertise its services. The program is that well-known.

But the key to staying power, it turns out, is not so much a weighty reputation as it is the nimbleness to adapt. When the pandemic hit, EBHCS – like all learning programs – sprang into emergency action. Within two weeks, classes shifted online, with the school's bilingual tech coordinator scrambling to help students access Zoom and Google Classroom. On the staff side, EBHCS held weekly meetings to support teachers with the challenges of a remote environment. Volunteers worked with students in individual breakout rooms to mimic the one-on-one attention of the classroom.

Realizing many families faced layoffs or worse, EBHCS also organized weekly food distribution to students. Every Wednesday, staff stood outside the building, regardless of weather, to give out freezer meals and fresh groceries. If a family was ill with COVID, the EBHCS team delivered food to their front door.

By the time summer arrived, exhausted EBHCS staff might have contented themselves with catching their breaths. But they saw the break in classes as an opportunity to do more – to keep evolving toward a new form of excellence.

"I attribute the preparation in Summer 2020 with making sure we had a more sophisticated online learning system our students would find worthwhile," said Carol Baglio, EBHCS education program director.

The program used the summer months to create new technology guides for students and archived its materials online where students could easily access them. For teachers, EBHCS created an online learning plan and set up individualized meetings with the program coordinator, Leah Gregory, who developed extra professional development workshops to focus on remote learning. EBHCS also hired co-teachers to assist those teachers less comfortable with technology.



Over the next school year, EBHCS not only delivered a newly sharpened curriculum, but also loaned 150 Chromebooks to students who needed them. When the staff surveyed students at the end of the year, they were surprised to learn how much the students had adapted, too: A majority (65%) now preferred remote learning.

Now, the program offers classes in-person, fully remote, and in hybrid form. Because being a mainstay in students' lives doesn't mean staying the same.

"This pandemic has brought out the best in all of us," Baglio said, "and challenged us to continually learn as our students do each and every day."

*East Boston Harborside Community School is one of 25 members of the Adult Literacy Initiative (ALI), a consortium of adult education programs led by the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development.*

# Connection



## ***Program for at-risk youth finds creative ways to teach hands-on career skills remotely***

Part of the mission of Youth Options Unlimited (YOU) Boston is to keep its young people connected – to case managers, team leaders, and each other – on the road to education and employment opportunities. That sense of community is especially life-saving for the young people YOU Boston serves, for whom healthy relationships have often been frayed by poverty, violence, or court involvement.

The shift to remote programming in 2020 added a technical challenge to that mission. But YOU Boston rose to the occasion by partnering with Tech Goes Home to distribute nearly 100 laptops and 40 hotspots to young people, ages 16-24, who participate in its programs. Thanks to this equipment (plus some crucial at-home hands-on materials) career cohort participants were able to remotely learn the basics of such industries as baking and pastry arts, barista and customer service, graphic design, and media arts. Summer 2021 career cohorts, while still virtual, even took field trips to sites related to their career interests – museums, a coffee shop, a bakery, and a yoga studio.

New this year, through its Advancing Careers Together pilot program, YOU Boston also brought its tech-enabled programming to young adults experiencing homelessness. In addition to career training, participants took a college course through Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology focused on communication and computer literacy. They also received a weekly stipend and targeted employment and case management in coordination with their housing case managers.

**In FY21, YOU Boston served 345 young people, including:**

**274**  
placed in  
subsidized employment

**17**  
who earned their  
high school credential

**54**  
placed in  
unsubsidized employment

**15**  
who enrolled in  
post-secondary education

## **Adult students acquire computer skills for an ever more digital workplace**



In April 2021, the Mayor's Office of Financial Empowerment launched the Bridge to Digital Literacy program to teach basic computer skills to adult students. The two-week class, which covers such topics as Google Workplace, Microsoft Office, social media, and online safety, aims to position students for stable careers in an increasingly digital world. (Even the class itself is virtual – the program lends grant-funded computers to students who need them.)

Along the way, the class also equips students with financial education to make the most of their money. All participants meet regularly with a financial coach, and the instructor folds money management skills into class assignments: A lesson on Excel spreadsheets doubles as an exercise in creating a home budget.

Since the program's inception, more than 50 students have successfully completed the course, including Marita Farrell, a resident who could not work outside her home due to medical issues. During the class, Farrell received a part-time offer doing remote sales for Viga Italian Eatery – a job that has since grown to a full-time, salaried operations position with benefits.

"I use Excel spreadsheets at work now because I think we need them," she said with a laugh.

## **Commitment**

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### **Free tuition electrifies Roslindale student's route to college**

Jailen Hamilton always assumed he was headed for the NBA. He shot hoops in the driveway of his Roslindale home, played in pickup games and community center leagues. By his senior year of high school, he'd worked hard to earn a spot on his school basketball team.

Then, just like that, an Achilles tendon injury sidelined him for the season. With dashed hopes for a basketball scholarship, college no longer made sense. He suddenly faced a dead-end.

"I told my guidance counselor, 'I'm not going to college. I don't want to go into debt. I don't know what I'm going to do,'" he recounted. "Then she said, 'What about trade school?'"



That's how Hamilton learned about the partnership between Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology (BFIT) and the Tuition-Free Community College Plan – a program from the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development that pays for tuition and mandatory fees at six local colleges.

"That stood out – tuition-free? I was like, 'Whoa, yes, sounds good!'"

In 2019, he started the BFIT electrical technology program. Though he'd never considered himself good at math, he kept at it with the encouragement of his professors. When the pandemic hit a year later, he drew on the tenacity he'd built on the basketball court.

"I knew it was going to be hard, but I knew I was going to finish," he said. "Once I start something, I like to finish it."

This past spring, Hamilton graduated with an Associate Degree in Electrical Technology and started working in the field. On weekdays, he dons his hardhat and boots and gets to work – installing light fixtures and outlets, padding electrical boxes, running wires and fire caulking to ensure building safety.

He’s still learning more about electrical work, except now he earns a solid paycheck.

“This money feels good,” he said. “It feels good to not have to worry. I’m doing more things for myself now, getting my own money and not just getting by.”

Looking back on the person he was in high school – a little lost and uncertain about the future – he has advice to offer anyone who finds themselves in a similar position: “If you want to do the same thing, whether it’s Tuition-Free Community College or trade school, go for it. Don’t be scared of the future. You’ve got to take charge.”

**600**

students have  
enrolled since 2016

**\$25,568**

median household income  
of new students

### ***Financial Navigators guide residents through economic obstacles***



**Financial  
Navigators**

For many Boston residents, the pandemic was not only a health crisis, but an economic one. That’s why, in October 2020, the Mayor’s Office of Financial Empowerment launched the grant-funded Financial Navigators helpline to provide callers with expert guidance tailored to their financial needs.

Since the start of the program, the Financial Navigators have held more than 650 phone sessions with residents in English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, and Portuguese. The Navigators helped residents with a range of concerns, including:

- Rent and utilities assistance
- Tax and stimulus payments
- Food resources
- Job search guidance
- Prioritizing expenses
- Debt management
- Income supports

All told, the Financial Navigators provided over 2,000 outbound referrals to get residents the financial help they needed.



## ***In street outreach, an Arabic teacher discovers her passion for public health***

In early 2021, Thoyba Elawad learned that the Boston Public Health Commission and the MIRA Coalition, an immigrants' rights organization, were hiring bilingual applicants for a six-month community health outreach program. The goal was to disseminate accurate information about the COVID-19 vaccine.

In many ways, Elawad was the perfect candidate. An Arabic teacher in her mosque's Sunday School, she could alternate between Arabic and English with ease.

Plus, she had just finished a stint knocking on doors for Census 2020 – a job that taught her how to approach strangers.

But Elawad ultimately decided to become a community health worker because she saw an urgent need. Dismayed by misinformation on social media, she had seen the effects on her own community of Sudanese immigrants, many of whom feared the vaccine would decrease women's fertility, despite the lack of evidence.

"I didn't choose this program for the professional experience," she said. "I did it because I want to connect my community with the information I know is needed."

After virtual trainings on COVID-19 safety and communication strategies, Elawad started canvassing public spaces in May with a small team of outreach workers, each fluent in a different language. Wearing an official T-shirt and badge, Elawad approached people in parks and on sidewalks to hand out flyers with vaccine information, public health guidance, and essential resources such as food and housing available from the City of Boston.

Oftentimes, her most important job was simply starting a conversation. When Elawad met people who expressed vaccine hesitancy, she didn't pressure them. Instead, she made sure they had accurate information in-hand, understood the importance of masking and social distancing, and knew where they could get a vaccine if they changed their mind.

Over the course of her work, Elawad has had hundreds of conversations like these, broadening her own horizons in the process. Her outreach has taken her to every neighborhood in the city, including the North End and East Boston – two places she'd never visited in two decades of living in Boston. She also learned about the wide array of available municipal resources, including home screenings for asthma triggers – something she wished she'd known when raising her own son with asthma.

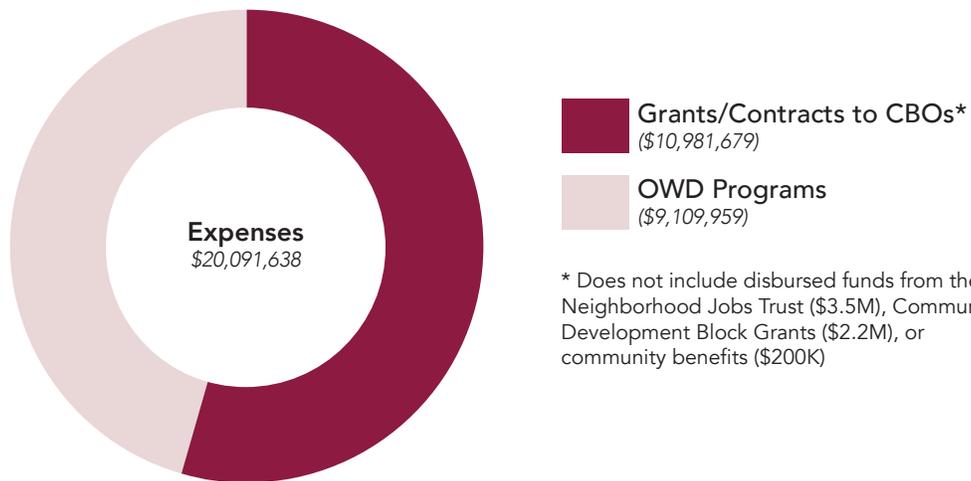
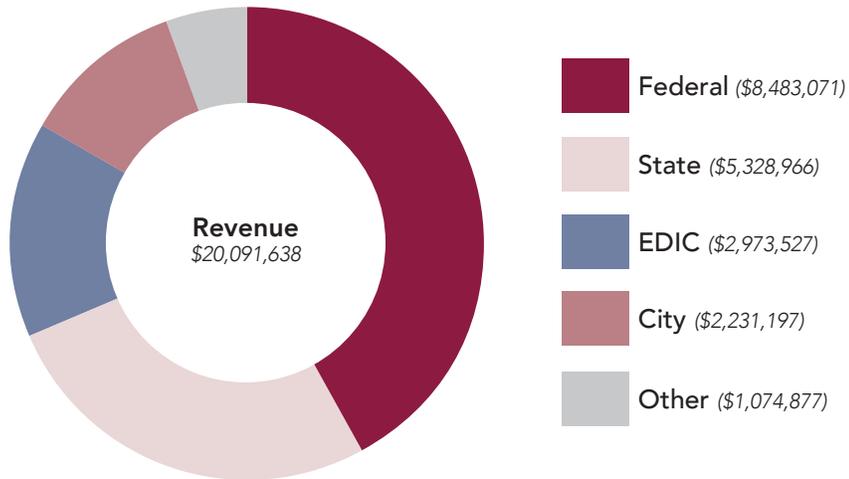
Perhaps most importantly, Elawad realizes she now wants to pursue community health work as a career. She's seen first-hand the unique difference she can make.

"When I find someone who speaks Arabic and give him information, he accepts it more. I can communicate with him more and he feels comfortable," she said. "If it was someone else, he probably wouldn't stop."

*The community health worker program is funded by the Neighborhood Jobs Trust, a public charitable trust stewarded by the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development. The Trust collects linkage fees from large-scale commercial developers, and distributes those funds to job training and education programs for Boston residents.*

# Financials

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\* Does not include disbursed funds from the Neighborhood Jobs Trust (\$3.5M), Community Development Block Grants (\$2.2M), or community benefits (\$200K)

# Acknowledgements

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Thank you to the many partners who make our work possible, including but not limited to:

Boston Housing Authority

Boston Private Industry Council

Boston Public Schools

Boston Youth Service Network

Commonwealth Corporation

English for New Bostonians

Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor & Workforce Development

Massachusetts Workforce Professionals Association

MassHire Career Centers

SkillWorks

U.S. Department of Labor

Our apologies if we unintentionally omitted any of our valued partners.

**And thank you to  
our staff:**

Avery Abel	Naby Diallo	Katie Liesener	Cinnamon Sanchez
Cecilia Caraballo Acevedo	Tyrinthia Douglas	Katie Mai	Enrique Sanchez
Kelvin Adjei-Akosah	Edward Downs, Jr.	Minh Mai	Lynn Sanders
Michael Andelman	Joanne Evans	Jonathan Makrez	Sabrina Santana
Katiana Anglade- Ogwueleka	Lee Fields	Frankline Mardi	Xavier Savage
Andre Dos Santos Aquino	Tracey Fils-Aime	Constance Martin	Bethany Serota
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	Rasheed Laborde	Erica Rokhman	
	Randi Laufman	Fatima Saidi	
	Nathan Le	Marita Sanabria	
	Todd Lee	Amarfi Sanchez	

