I always feel energized this time of year, as winter finally turns into spring and the days grow longer. Here at Central City Concern (CCC), we have planted many seeds that have blossomed into full-fledged programs that support our mission to end homelessness in Portland.

We are working with Multnomah County to expand our Stabilization for Treatment Program at the former Budget Lodge motel on Barbur Boulevard in Southwest Portland. Once renovations are completed, the single room occupancy facility will serve as a safe landing place for 22 individuals discharged from psychiatric inpatient programs such as the Unity Center for Behavioral Health, as well as the Oregon State Hospital and area emergency rooms. Clients will stay from one to three months while staff members help them navigate health care and social services, support them with life skills such as healthy cooking and find them appropriate long-term housing.

This project is truly a collaboration that will help us support people with severe mental illness who shouldn't have to go back to the street without a support system. Our partners, the Joint Office of Homeless Services, CareOregon, Oregon Food Bank and Home Forward, are working together to create this transitional housing intervention that we know works well.

Our health care network is also expanding. In March, we opened a clinic in the Hansen Shelter, which is operated by Transition Projects. This is CCC's first clinic offering medical

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The National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) honored CCC with a 2017 Innovation and Excellence Award on Oct. 26, 2017, at the Newseum in Washington, D.C. Ed Blackburn, CCC’s president and CEO emeritus, accepted the prestigious award on behalf of the agency.

NAEH wrote: “Central City Concern is honored for its outstanding legacy in the mission to end homelessness in Portland, OR. Under the leadership of Mr. Ed Blackburn, Central City Concern has become a national model for integrated services for people experiencing homelessness. Blackburn’s highly collaborative approach has also served as an effective case study for sharing best practices and leveraging success to benefit communities across the nation.”
The application process to obtain Social Security benefits is notoriously complicated and comprehensive to ensure only those truly unable to earn wages receive Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or both. Unfortunately, those most in need are often unable to apply successfully by their own efforts. So since March 2008, CCC’s Benefits and Entitlements Specialist Team (BEST) program has helped particularly vulnerable individuals—most experiencing homelessness or deep poverty and living with severe disabilities—navigate the maze.

BEST uses its expertise to maximize the chances of a successful application by building the strongest case possible. They gather information through interviews with the client and others who are familiar with the client’s situation. They coordinate and pay for psychological and medical exams. Stacks of paperwork over a foot tall for each case are common.

In the 10 years BEST has been active, the program has helped more than 1,600 people find hope, bringing nearly $65 million into Portland and Multnomah County to be used for rent, groceries and other daily economic activities.

Due to their fluency in the system, BEST wins 67 percent of their initial applications, compared to 32 percent of applicants from the general population; an additional 6 percent win awards after reconsideration or appeal. To put their impact even more starkly, only 15 percent of applicants nationwide who are homeless are awarded benefits.

Kellie F. counts herself among the fortunate. She has an exceedingly difficult time remembering things, a lifelong condition that has caused her great difficulties. She worked with BEST to win her case after an initial denial. “Having an income now gives me some more hope and I can imagine better things to come.”

Behind each award is a person who has found stability they wouldn’t have had otherwise. A person who doesn’t feel as anxious about how they’ll afford necessities. A person who feels prepared to become a contributing part of the community. A person like Kellie.

“When I found out I qualified for SSDI, I felt like I could be part of society again,” she says. “Life is a heck of a lot better than it was.”
On Feb. 13, CCC’s Imani Center celebrated the long-awaited remodel of their offices in the historic Golden West Hotel building by hosting an open house for staff and community partners. It was a great opportunity to give folks the chance to check in on the incredible work the program has been doing over the last two years providing culturally responsive Afrocentric approaches to mental health and addictions treatment. The Imani Center has brought so much healing and joy into Portland’s Black recovery community, and it was all the more special to celebrate them during Black History Month.

CCC President & CEO Rachel Solotaroff, Director of Equity and Inclusion Freda Ceaser, Director of African American Services Linda Hudson, and Malcolm, a graduate of the program, all shared remarks.

Guests were also able to see for the first time incredible pieces of art donated to CCC by Discover African Art, owned by Dave Dahl, co-founder of Dave’s Killer Bread.

The pieces brought into the Golden West were thoughtfully chosen by CCC’s volunteer Art Task Force, an energetic group of community members steeped in the local art world who have gathered scores of donated works to display across many CCC buildings. This esteemed collection of original, museum-grade art, known as the Healing Through Art collection, has the power to elicit feelings of hope, calm and healing for patients, residents, staff members and everyone who visits our buildings.

National Volunteer Week is April 15-21. At CCC, our volunteers contribute in countless ways by sharing their time, expertise and hard work across our many programs. They inspire us with their compassion and dedication to making an impact in the lives of those we serve.

Robert Stewart is just one of CCC’s exemplary volunteers. Though he initially approached CCC without a clear sense of how he wanted to volunteer, he’s since developed a weekly container gardening activity for the members of our Old Town Recovery Center’s Living Room program.

“Robert has been one of our most outstanding volunteers,” says Hayden Buell, CCC’s Living Room team lead. “He took the initiative to create a program of container gardening, which has become one of our most asked-about activities. He’s gone above and beyond in his support of our program, often coming in on days we need an extra hand or helping us get into the community on our outings.

“He connects with members on a personal level and is an important part of our team.”

267 CCC volunteers gave 6,676 hours in 2017.
Kassy grew up in a loving household, but her struggles with ADHD made it difficult for her to control her temper and succeed in school. Her behavior issues escalated, and by the time she reached her teens, she landed in residential mental health facilities. She started drinking and using methamphetamine, eventually dropping out of school. At 21, she started working in a strip club and selling meth.

Her family was devastated. They wanted to support Kassy, but didn’t want to enable her; they simply didn’t know how to help her and often didn’t know where she was. Kassy avoided them until she needed something. “She had to want to change,” her dad John said. “We couldn’t do it for her.”

After eight years working in the club, Kassy was arrested. She was pregnant, so the judge allowed her to go to CCC’s Letty Owings Center (LOC). “We were so thankful to finally know where she was,” her mom Cindy said. Even after Kassy’s son Ace was born, she wasn’t interested in getting better. “I was just going through the motions to stay out of jail,” Kassy said. But a few months later, Ace became seriously ill. “I realized his life depended on me. If I had been high, I might not have gotten him help in time.”

Since then, Kassy has poured everything into her recovery and becoming the best mom she can be. She gained her GED diploma and Mental Health Peer Support Mentor certificate. She’s studying to become a drug and alcohol counselor. And the best thing: she and her family are back together. They spend time together every weekend, and Kassy knows they are there to help her and Ace if they ever need it.