

Published by Mon Valley Initiative • Founded 1988

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Clairton, MVI partnership continued to grow in 2021

The \$16.7 million Clairton Inn development taking shape at the corner of Miller and St. Clair avenues may be the most highly visible evidence of Mon Valley Initiative's investment in the city.

But behind the scenes, MVI and its public and private partners are strengthening their commitment to the community of 6,700, located almost exactly in the geographic center of Mon Valley Initiative's three-county service area.

In January 2021, MVI took over as

the lead agency in Clairton's six-year neighborhood partnership program. The NPP includes two key components—the Clairton Cares Initiative, a community engagement project focused on health and human services, and the Produce Marketplace, a neighborhood grocery store focused on healthy and local foods.

Four former staff members of Economic Development South who were leading the Clairton programs have joined MVI, including Joey-Linn Ulrich,

now MVI's chief operating officer; Maddie Nagel, community outreach specialist and Clairton Cares coordinator; and Felix Fusco and Loraine Lee of the Produce Marketplace.

Enfolding EDS's Clairton outreach programs was a natural fit for Mon Valley Initiative, says Laura R. Zinski, MVI chief executive officer.

"So many of the issues that face the Mon Valley—for instance, the need for sustainable jobs, affordable housing and

better health outcomes—cross neighborhood and municipal borders," Zinski says. "MVI made a strategic decision several years ago to shift from a coalition of small groups to a regional community development organization that could tackle larger issues with impactful projects."

Many Clairton residents already were taking advantage of MVI's workforce development and housing counseling programs, Zinski says. "We already had a

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CEO: Pandemic hasn't stopped our programs—or the Mon Valley's progress

When the COVID-19 lockdown hit back in 2020, we were as worried as anyone else. We wondered how we were going to continue to implement our programs and services, trying to make sure we could be there for our friends and neighbors through such a difficult time.

I'm so proud to say that over the past 18 months, we've been able to help and support Mon Valley communities using new methods and adding new service components, including enfolding the programs and staff of another non-profit to ensure continued service.



services and financial coaching, our workforce team helped local residents access COVID-19 programs that provided rent and utility relief and to apply for health care, employment benefits and other resources for themselves and their children.

Our housing counseling program provided advice to homeowners who were having difficulty making their mortgage payments. Our outreach team provided resources to the community, including residents of our more than 120 affordable rental units.

In addition to providing employment assistance

home, our real estate team has been out in the field, working to deliver on important projects.

Things looked dark in 2020—but every sunset comes with the promise of new dawn, a new day and new opportunities. We hope this update will let you know about some of the successes that were achieved in 2021—thanks in large part to your support and the amazing efforts of so many of our Mon Valley neighbors, friends and partners.

Laura R. Zinski

Laura R. Zinski
Chief Executive Officer

\$16.7 million Clairton Inn development includes five commercial spaces



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presence in Clairton, and we're proud to be deepening that connection," she says. "We've been participating in the NPP from the very beginning, and our working relationship with partners such as Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh, as well as city elected officials and community leaders, continues to grow."

The Clairton NPP's efforts were recognized by Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf in May 2021 with a Governor's Award for Local Government Excellence in the category "promoting community and economic revitalization."

MVI is the lead developer on Clairton Inn, a 49-unit apartment building with several commercial spaces on the first floor. Occupancy is scheduled to begin in mid-2022. The community held a sym-

bolic ground-breaking in October 2020, but work began in earnest in early 2021, with the demolition of several blighted buildings along Miller Avenue.

The project preserves the historic 1900-era Clairton Inn while adding an entirely new, 70,000-square-foot structure that will include 22 one-bedroom apartments, 12 two-bedroom apartments and 15 three-bedroom apartments.

Seven of the units will be fully accessible to people with limited mobility. All of the apartments will be affordable to households at 50 percent of area median income.

Andrew Ritchie, MVI real estate developer, says the development is now fully "dried-in"—meaning the exterior is water-tight and sealed from the elements—so that construction crews will be able

to focus on finishing the interior spaces throughout the coming fall and winter.

Funding is being provided through tax credits authorized by the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Authority and purchased by PNC Bank, with additional financial support from the state Department of Community & Economic Development's Keystone Communities program, Allegheny County Economic Development, the City of Clairton, MVI and Economic Development South. Support also is provided through the NPP by BNY Mellon, Highmark, and HM Insurance Group, a Highmark company.

NDC Asset Management of Pittsburgh will serve as the residential leasing agent for the apartments, while real estate agent Mark Harvey Smith is handling commercial leasing on the first floor.

Clairton Cares crosses disciplines, creates connections

Traditional approaches to improving community health often focus on individualized care or medical treatments, says Maddie Nagel, MVI community outreach specialist.

Clairton Cares is a more collaborative approach that is working to address the root causes of health inequities by providing critical connections between organizations working on preventative care, access to healthier foods, mental health and wellness and youth programs.

"With Clairton Cares, we're taking a system-based approach to health improvement which encompasses the whole community ecosystem," she says.

The Clairton Cares initiative, launched in 2016 and now part of MVI, works with residents, social-services providers, health care practitioners, educators and other community leaders to create a more holistic model of care focused on community wellbeing, not individual interventions.

"What we're learning is that building these kinds of relationships is incredibly important," Nagel says. "We're trying to create a complementary, or mutually reinforcing, vision of health and well-being between residents, community groups and providers. Those three stakeholders are important, and having a community-embedded component is critical."

Nagel works from an office in Clairton's municipal building as well as from the Produce Marketplace,

located on St. Clair Avenue, about a block from where the Clairton Inn development is rising.

Produce Marketplace was created after residents raised the need for a fresh grocery store. Since the closure of Clairton's last supermarket about 15 years ago, the city had been served only by convenience and dollar stores selling processed foods that are often high in sodium, refined sugar and fat.

Felix Fusco, a lifelong Clairton native who retired from a career in retail management, oversees day-to-day operations of Produce Marketplace. The store added new store hours and days of operation in 2021 and carries a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, in season, as well as locally sourced items.

"Our philosophy is very simple," Fusco says. "We bring fresh food to Clairton in a dignified, convenient way for all of the community. We're not in competition with Dollar General or Rite Aid. We don't carry cleaning products or potato chips. We carry fresh fruit, fresh



Maddie Nagel and Felix Fusco are two members of the Clairton Cares team.

vegetables, deli meats and cheeses."

Fusco also helps with a community garden, which was an early project of the NPP. He remembers when Clairton was a thriving post-war community, and was discouraged to see the city becoming depressed in the 1980s and 1990s.

"We're seeing an opportunity to turn the corner now in Clairton and MVI is a major part of that," Fusco says. "There is some light at the end of the tunnel. I'm very pleased where we are right now."

2021 Institutional Donors

The board of directors and staff of Mon Valley Initiative are grateful to the following corporations, foundations and agencies whose contributions made our programs possible this year.

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2021 Individual Donors

The board of directors and staff of Mon Valley Initiative are grateful to the following individuals whose generous contributions helped to make our programs possible.

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Housing Counseling



First house is 'absolute heaven' for new homeowner

Madeline Sample was renting throughout the Mon Valley and was tired of paying landlords who kept raising her rent but were unwilling to make repairs. A few years ago, she decided it was time to buy her first home. Unfortunately, a bank turned her down for a mortgage with little explanation. A friend suggested she ask Mon Valley Initiative for help.

Sample met with Jonathan Weaver, MVI housing counselor, who pulled her credit report, recommended areas that could be improved and worked with her on ways to improve her financial score.

For more than six months, Sample saved and regularly worked with Weaver. When she finally felt financially secure—and found a home she really loved in Versailles Borough—Weaver helped her get pre-approved for a mortgage and guided her negotiations with a loan officer.

"(Weaver's) closing statement was always 'let me know if you need anything,'" Sample says. "He was so encouraging throughout the whole process and he never pushed too hard. The process was overwhelming at times, but you can't let the overwhelming moments take over."

Sample was so pleased with MVI's housing counseling program that she sent her son to Weaver to help him build his credit and start saving for his future. "My new home is absolute heaven—a sanctuary," she says. "It is so peaceful and I can make it my own."

Workforce team celebrates 20 years helping residents find career paths

Mon Valley Initiative's Workforce Development & Financial Coaching program celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2021.

Since 2001, MVI coaches have been helping people re-enter the workforce by providing them with referrals to training and educational opportunities, resume creation help, job-interview practice sessions, on-site job fairs, advice for individuals with criminal backgrounds and personalized career planning advice.

MVI also works with hundreds of employers and recruiters in the Greater Pittsburgh area to match program participants with job openings in Allegheny, Washington and Westmoreland counties.

COVID-19 shutdowns and business closures caused a drop in program participation and job placements in 2020, says T. Charles Howell IV, director of workforce development & financial coaching, but as the job market recovered, the program came roaring back in 2021.

In all of 2020, MVI coaches placed 123 people in 147 jobs. So far in 2021, MVI has enrolled 241 people in the workforce program—about 87 percent of the goal for the entire year—and placed 144 people in new jobs.

Over the past 18 months, MVI's coaches also have been working to identify new employer-partners that

offer sustainable, long-term employment for program participants, and that effort is paying off, Howell says.

Many of the job placements for program participants in 2021 have been with employers who are new to working with MVI, he says.

One strong feature of MVI's workforce program has been its free computer classes. Classes were suspended during 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but resumed in 2021. Taught by Joyce Evans, MVI's longtime computer teacher, those classes cover skills ranging from saving and sharing email attachments to creating documents in Microsoft Word, Excel and other business-oriented applications.

In addition, in 2021, MVI added a 10-week pre-employment certificate program that covers topics such as "writing resumes that win," virtual interviewing, cultural diversity and credit and employment.

"The certificate classes are designed to cover a variety of topics to help people navigate the minefields of preparing to work in an environment changed by technology and COVID-19," Howell says.

The third round of the 10-week courses concluded Oct. 19 and the certificate has proved to be a valuable addition to the workforce team's offerings, he says.

What people are saying about MVI's workforce development program:

"I'm glad that my employment specialist at family division referred me to MVI. They are a one-of-a-kind agency!"

—David, program participant

"My dream was to become a productive member of society by getting a job. Thank you, MVI staff! I am in a position to help others and I am overjoyed."

—Dawn, program participant

"I would absolutely recommend that companies partner with MVI. They have a great team of people. They have relationships with multiple recruitment and staffing agencies. One of the companies I supported was in Turtle Creek, and with MVI's help, I was able to get (people) really solid jobs with really solid pay. You all are doing great work."

—Kevin, corporate recruiter



Our mission

Mon Valley Initiative strengthens the Mon Valley region by responsibly investing in our people and places. We are carrying out our mission by:

- Working together with local residents and stakeholders
- Providing career and financial coaching to individuals
- Developing residential and commercial properties
- Delivering technical assistance services to our partners

www.monvalleyinitiative.com



Local advisory groups

Local advisory groups and community development corporations have been important to Mon Valley Initiative since its foundation in 1988. Volunteer-led, grassroots organizations serve as key contacts in the communities we serve, including Braddock, Charleroi, Clairton, East Pittsburgh, Homestead, Monessen, Munhall, North Braddock, Rankin, Swissvale, Turtle Creek and West Newton and the surrounding areas.

Services of MVI

Southwestern Pennsylvania Re-Entry Coalition
Produce Marketplace, Clairton

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Or make a monthly pledge to MVI via [Patreon](#): www.patreon.com/monvalleyinitiative.

Mon Valley Initiative in the news



Andrew Carnegie once said, “A sunny disposition is worth more than fortune.” Laurie Longenecker’s corner condominium suggests she would agree. ¶ The Schoolhouse Condominiums are bright and welcoming, with tall windows. ¶ Longnecker credits the schoolhouse’s original builders as well as developers Mon Valley Initiative and Swissvale Economic Development Corp. for creating stunning spaces that showcase her artwork. ¶ “The sunlight that comes in here is just so magnificent. I chose to have the half curtains so I could have the sunlight all the time.” (“Buying Here: Sunny Schoolhouse condominium in Swissvale priced at \$208,600,” May 14, 2021)

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette®

AP

Imagine living in an apartment that houses a chandelier and pipe organ donated by Andrew Carnegie. In the next few years, it could be a possibility. ¶ Pennsylvania has announced tax credits for the owners of 27 historic buildings that are being restored and rehabilitated, including First United Presbyterian Church of Braddock. ¶ Church members “were very clear that they did not want to see it fall apart into disrepair (and) become a blighted, abandoned building,” said Dave Yargeau, MVI real estate developer. ¶ Two of the units will have loft spaces; one will have a small chandelier; and one located in what used to be the sanctuary will include the organ and chandelier as fixtures. (“Churches, train stations: Historic buildings rehabilitated,” July 26, 2021)



Evictions could spike in Pennsylvania and across the nation when an eviction moratorium is lifted.

¶ “We want people to know that there is help available—that you don’t have to go through this period of uncertainty by yourself,” said Dr. T. Charles Howell IV of Mon Valley Initiative. ¶ MVI is helping residents connect with COVID-19 emergency relief for rent, utilities, health care and more, Howell said. (“Evictions could spike when eviction moratorium lifts,” Aug. 4, 2021)

WTAE