

## Project Case Study: Employment Connection

**United  
Way**



- > Employment Connection, an agency supported by the United Way of Greater St. Louis, was founded in 1977 to serve ex-offenders, who were, at the time, 66 percent less likely to return to incarceration if employed. By 1980, Employment Connection expanded its services to assist the homeless, US veterans, high school dropouts, women on welfare, and at-risk youth. Today, the agency helps nearly 2,000 individuals a year as they continue to “break down barriers to self-sufficiency” with the motto “Empower. Employ. Inspire.”

 employment connection

Client: Brenda Mahr, Employment Connection CEO  
Website: [employmentstl.org](http://employmentstl.org)

### *the* PROJECT

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“Initially, we wanted a way to energize our board,” said Brenda Mahr, Employment Connection’s CEO. “We had board members who had been with us from the very beginning of the agency and have been incredibly dedicated. I wanted to round out the board with new members who brought a different perspective and skill set.”

Employment Connections’ first Olin/United Way Board Fellow experience was so positive that the agency has continued to participate in the program for the last five years. Every Board Fellow continues to serve on the Employment Connection board. Steve Fiamingo, MBA ’12 and the agency’s first Board Fellow, is currently serving as board president.

All six Board Fellows have helped Mahr draft and hone a business plan to form a business within the agency—a temporary employment service that works with ex-offenders to find jobs and immediately establish a work history.

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### *the* PROCESS

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The Board Fellow spends one year on the board of a nonprofit as a voting member—a major commitment for both the nonprofit and the student. Program Director Al Kent says that is why onboarding and board mentors are so important.

As a Board Fellow, Fiamingo found it relatively easy to get up to speed, thanks to Mahr's foresight. "I spent several hours with Brenda during my new board member orientation," Fiamingo said. "She took me around the entire organization, having me meet the employees and talk about their work. It was great to experience the front lines where the action is really happening." Fiamingo also reported that he had a great board mentor who was instrumental in his success: "My board mentor was Al Sears, the treasurer of the board. My project was complex, and Al had a lot of familiarity with the topic and was able to guide me along the way."

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—Brenda Mahr  
Employment Connection CEO

Fiamingo believes Olin's support system contributed significantly to his success on the Employment Connection Board. "I was able to access resources in the law school to help me explore legal implications of my project. I also bounced ideas off professors," he said. Kent agrees that the support system is a huge benefit: "We encourage our Board Fellows to take advantage of all the diverse areas of expertise. We are here to make this a successful year for the nonprofit and our students."

In Mahr's view, the CEL has sent Employment Connection outstanding candidates. "We wanted these board members to continue to serve, so we amended the bylaws so they could," she said. "That's how significant we think their contributions have been!"

## **the OUTCOME**

Mahr's social enterprise vision has become a reality. Last year, Employment Connection made \$1.6 million, employed more than 220 people, and generated a profit of \$225,000 to invest in other programs. Those 220 people served now have work histories and incomes. They are spending money in St Louis, and they are also taxpayers who contribute to the community.

For Fiamingo, sitting on the Employment Connection board was an integral part of his educational and work experience. "Students will not find a better opportunity at Olin to get real-world exposure and experience. The boardroom experience cannot be taught in a class or learned by reading a textbook," says Fiamingo. "I believe we are doing our part to really make a difference in the community."

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—Steve Fiamingo

MBA '12, former Employment Connection Board Fellow and current Board President

## **next STEPS**

### **Interested in more information?**

While every United Way of Greater St. Louis agency is eligible to host a Board Fellow, we have parameters in place to ensure successful outcomes for the agency and our students.

To begin the conversation, email Rick Skinner, Vice President for the Volunteer Center at United Way of Greater St. Louis, at [rick.skinner@stl.unitedway.org](mailto:rick.skinner@stl.unitedway.org).