



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

COALITION DELIVERS PROMISING UPDATE ON POST-EXPLOSION BUSINESS RECOVERY

More than 70 percent of affected business in Lawrence, Andover and North Andover returned to pre-explosion operations; Regional Marketing Campaign Launched

LAWRENCE (July 9, 2019) – Nearly ten months after last September’s gas explosions in Lawrence, Andover and North Andover, more than 70 percent of the nearly 900 small, locally-owned businesses affected by the disaster have returned to pre-crisis operations, according to a status report provided by the collaboration of non-government organizations, nonprofits, municipalities and state government officials spearheading the recovery. Since the explosions on September 13, 2018, the coalition has conducted outreach to impacted businesses through nearly 4,000 site visits, phone calls and other efforts; helped small businesses secure \$500,000 in loans; provided technical assistance in hiring, accounting and marketing; and assisted with claims filings. More than 200 businesses received resiliency training and specialized support.

As a result of the explosions and subsequent service disruptions, markets and restaurants lost their inventories; closed businesses lost their employees and key staff; and customers, who were forced to change their spending habits due to the explosions, were no longer frequenting their favorite coffee shops, convenience stores, salons and other businesses. Owners struggled to pay their bills, feed their families and afford housing. While touting the progress, the coalition also cautioned that there is much work still to be done to support nearly 30 percent of businesses in the region that are not back to normal.

“As a small business owner who was affected by the gas explosions, I am all too familiar with the disruption and economic loss suffered by other business owners in the area,” Claimed State Senator Barry Finegold. “Making those affected by the Columbia Gas explosions whole is among my top priorities as a State Senator, and I’m grateful to the Lawrence Partnership and participating organizations for providing these much-needed resources for small business owners. The majority of businesses are back to where they were before the explosions, thanks in large part to these stabilizing efforts.”

Stabilization Efforts

Business leaders, town employees from Lawrence, Andover and North Andover, state officials, and community advocates comprised the heart of the coalition, which met on an almost weekly basis to respond to the initial crisis and develop and implement integrated programming to support impacted business. Leveraging a financial commitment to business resiliency in the region from Columbia Gas and entrusted to the Essex County Community Foundation, the coalition, convened by the Lawrence Partnership, has built on the work it started in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. The group aligned resources, developed strategies and implemented a variety of critical services to help these businesses back to life.

- **EforAll/EparaTodos**, a bilingual nonprofit focused on business development, has spearheaded the outreach work and claims support to the affected businesses through nearly 4,000 site visits, phone calls and other activities. They have made 400 secondary referrals connecting affected businesses with technical assistance and have helped more than 50 businesses secure an additional combined \$100,000 in claims from Columbia Gas.

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- **Mill Cities Community Investments (MCCI)**, a Lawrence-based Community Development Financial Institution with a successful commercial lending program in Lawrence for non-bankable small businesses, has administered close to \$500,000 in emergency loans to affected businesses, providing the capital they need to recover and rebuild. This fund was convened with leadership from Mass Growth Capital Corporation and included capital from 20 distinct regional banks and credit unions.
 - **EparaTodos, MCCI and MassHire/Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board** – a state agency that connects businesses and jobseekers – have led 30 marketing, accounting and employment workshops, giving more than 200 businesses the knowledge they need to maintain, staff and promote their businesses.
 - Nearly \$300,000 in business stabilization funding has been deployed to more than 60 businesses. This is funding for direct costs not covered by claims nor that can be managed by emergency loans.

20 regional lenders, led by **Mass Growth Capital Corporation**, committed over \$2,000,000 to an emergency loan fund that lent nearly \$500,000 to impacted businesses during the time of the crisis.

Launching Regional Marketing Campaign

The next phase of support is a regional marketing campaign that celebrates the hundreds of small, locally owned businesses, while encouraging residents to shop locally and serve as advocates of the business community. The campaign launched July 1.

“Rock the Register’ highlights the importance of local businesses to the fabric of the community, and how as residents and consumers we can lift them up by shopping local and encouraging others to do the same,” said State Rep. Christina Minicucci, who also serves as an Ex-officio member of the Steering Committee. “In addition to driving sales, the campaign will create a sense of pride and demonstrate the strength, perseverance and cohesiveness of our communities.”

Through advertising, marketing, storytelling and shopper incentives – a sweepstakes program in the summer and ‘Rock the Register’ gift cards in the fall – together, we will embrace the local business community and reinvigorate it with life.

“Our hope with this campaign is that people will be reminded of the incredible entrepreneurship and offerings that are available in Lawrence, Andover and North Andover, realize that the gas crisis is still impacting these businesses and make the conscious choice to support them,” said Frank Carvalho, Executive Director of Mill Cities Community Investments.

Enhancing Business Resiliency

Looking ahead to the fall, the Coalition and Steering Committee will focus on business resiliency and, among other things, will:

Expand the resiliency loan funding Lawrence to become a perpetual offering to Lawrence, Andover and North Andover non-bankable businesses.

Continue accounting and bookkeeping classes with monetary incentives.

Offer a business accelerator program for local businesses.

Rock the Register is an important initiative that will revitalize our small businesses who are still trying to get back on their feet following the gas disaster of September 13th. After the gas crisis, we have worked tirelessly to uplift all of our small businesses across the Greater Lawrence area, and the rock the register initiative is a leading factor in these efforts. It is our responsibility as residents of Lawrence to support all of our immigrant owned businesses who are the core of our community,” said Lawrence Mayor Dan Rivera.

Andover Town Manager Andrew Flanagan noted that, “the entire recovery process has been about building stronger communities. Paramount to those efforts has been a focus on both the small and larger businesses that are part of the fabric of our community. Andover and Merrimack Valley are strongest when both businesses and residents support each other. This campaign will be about supporting our businesses across the region and 100% consistent with our efforts to build stronger and more vibrant communities. Merrimack Valley is proud of its business community and this campaign will highlight the diverse composition of our businesses, the talents of their employees and the resilience and perseverance that has embodied their work since September 13th.”

“In November 2018 the Town of North Andover had a gift card program for the local businesses which was a great success in helping them recover from the gas disaster,” said North Andover acting town manager Lyn Savage. “We hope to continue that success and bring the businesses back to the levels prior to September 13, 2018 disaster, through the Business Recovery Program’s “Rock the Register,” as well as future initiatives.”

“We credit this comeback to the incredible team of people who care deeply about the recovery and sustainability of the Greater Lawrence business community,” said Stratton Lloyd, COO and vice president for community leadership at ECCF. “The collective work to help restore hundreds of businesses in the wake of the gas tragedy means that people have regained their jobs, livelihoods, and most of all, hope that we have reached a tipping point in the recovery of small businesses in Lawrence, Andover and North Andover.” “We lacked heat for nearly two months and saw a huge drop in sales that are just now starting to come back,” said Kellee Twadelle, proprietor Rose and Dove in North Andover. “The confidence of our consumers was shattered, and the disruptions caused by construction on our streets made it nearly impossible to access our store. We are grateful for the various efforts to stabilize our business over the last nine months, but more work still lies ahead. Most importantly, we are still here and we want our customers to know that...and to continue to come back. We are ready to Rock the Register.”

We are a small business and don’t have an IT department like bigger businesses, so we are grateful,” said Amy Hitchmoth, membership director at Best You Training and Fitness Center in Andover, a small business that has received much-needed website support from the **Coalition. Key partners in this Coalition also included the City of Lawrence, the Town of Andover, the Town of North Andover, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.**

To oversee ongoing strategic investments in the business ecosystem, a five-person regional steering committee has been established, which includes

- Wendy Estrella
- Alex Mercedes
- Tim Vaill
- Deneven O’connell
- Larry Andrews

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The acute work to ensure that businesses return to their pre-crisis state is likely to continue through the end of 2019. But the Coalition is also now focused on business resiliency and growth – for all Greater Lawrence businesses. By working to increase the capacity of the entire business community and by creating regional job and economic opportunities, businesses will be given the chance to prosper and will be better equipped to withstand future stresses and shocks.

For more information about Rock the Register, visit <http://www.rocktheregister.com>.

For more information about business support initiatives we have developed
<http://www.mvopenforbusiness.org>.

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