



Cesar L. Laure The Morning Call

BILLY SIMMONS, 30, of Allentown, a client of the human services agency Via, feeds tropical fish as part of his start-up venture Wednesday. His story inspired Bethlehem to start an investment program of its own, called DO IT.

City puts up cash for special entrepreneurs

Disabled clients of Via will get seed money to start up businesses.

By **Nicole Radziewich**
Of The Morning Call

A recent news story about a Via client starting his own online fish farm got some Bethlehem leaders thinking.

Via of the Lehigh Valley, which helps people with developmental disabilities, is headquartered in the city. And city officials have experience luring entrepreneurs to build up the tax base and vitality of the downtowns. Why not lend that expertise to Via?

The result is DO IT: Disability Opportunity Investment Trust.

Next year, the city plans to spend up to \$30,000 on helping Via clients develop their business plans and will invest some initial cash to launch the business.

The city's goal is to get two businesses going next year, though there may be more depending on how many clients are ready.

Depending on its success,

the city could use other programs, like its loan pools, to help those businesses renovate facades or make other improvements. And Mayor John Callahan is hoping those new entrepreneurs continue to prime the city's economic pump by forming relationships with existing city businesses.

"This provides not only a social benefit but also an economic one," Callahan said.

Callahan is proposing to fund the new program through its portion of its \$2 million Community and Economic Development Block Grant, federal money aimed at helping low- to moderate-income communities. A City Council committee is scheduled next Tuesday to review the proposed CDBG budget.

In the DO IT program, the city would inject some cash early on, when money is at its tightest, and take an equity interest in the business, similar to what the Ben Franklin Partnership does, said city Economic Development Coordinator Howard Lieberman. Once the business is financially stable, the investment would convert to a loan.

"We're still working out

the details," Lieberman said. "The business model still has to be finalized, but it will be extremely flexible in order to give the business the best opportunity to succeed."

Via clients won't be competing for the program. Rather, Via staff will work with the clients, and whoever is ready to begin planning can tap the city's expertise. Via will then provide the support that clients need to succeed.

Via has been developing the business ownership program for its clients over the past two years. So far, four clients have launched their own business. Among them is Billy Simmons, whose story in a July edition of The Morning Call inspired the city to become a Via partner.

Simmons, a 30-year-old who was diagnosed with a developmental disability as a child, teamed up with a job coach to brainstorm a business he could run. What he came up with was an idea to sell 63 kinds of fish through his Web site, www.billystropicalfish.com.

While still in its early stages, Simmons smiles when he talks about his business. He knows the details down to

the 20 gallons of water that fill each of the 36 tanks he has in Allentown.

"I think it's cool," he said.

The program is part of strategy to expand employment among people with disabilities. The U.S. Department of Labor reports 70 percent of adults with disabilities are unemployed. In fact, the only option years ago for those people were workshops and sheltered environments where they did repetitive tasks.

Ronald Rucker, Via president and chief executive officer, said it was his organization's goal to help reverse that situation through programs like DO IT.

"This could be a model to other providers," he said.

Via helps 100 clients find work a year. Four have started their own businesses.

Via, a nonprofit human services agency, helps more than 1,000 individuals with developmental disabilities and families from birth to retirement.

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