

Executive director: HRA-BCO merger is going smoothly

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NEW BRITAIN — It has been two months since the Human Resources Agency of New Britain acquired the Bristol Community Organization. HRA Executive Director Rocco Tricarico said this week that the transition has, for the most part, been smooth.

Tricarico said the agency was invited in a few years ago by the Bristol Community Organization and its board to provide technical assistance.

"They were having some issues meeting certain goals, struggling with their budget," he told The Herald. "A number of deficiencies needed to be corrected. So, we held some preliminary discussions about merging our agencies."

Tricarico explained that HRA merged operations because there was "an unmet need" for social services and safety net services. "Our intent was not to put BCO out of business," he said. "We were invited here by BCO with the support of (the Department of Social Services) to save the

services, to create a superior model of service for this area. Our intent here is to reach out to everyone who needs services. We want to bring the services to where the people are."

Agency officials will eventually consider a more descriptive name for the new organization. Until then, the name of the nonprofit is HRA-Bristol.

Tricarico said the agency plans to become more visible in Bristol and increase its investment in the community. The computer and IT systems have been upgraded and the facility has been modernized and cleaned.

"We've put money into this building and in to programs that have been neglected for 20 years," Tricarico said. "We have a business model that works. A year from now, Bristol residents will see the difference and notice the impact."

Nancy Pelletier says she has already noticed a change.

The 61-year-old Bristol resident, a client on long-term disability, has been coming to BCO for energy assistance for

several years. The organization pays a matching amount on her electric bill.

"I'm pleased with the merger," Pelletier said. "I'm dealing with the same person who is familiar with my case. It's excellent. The building itself looks new; you can see they've done some work to spruce up everything."

"We've made some physical improvements here," Tricarico said. "We felt the office was too institutionalized; it reminded us of a post office from the 1950s. So, we created a work environment the staff could enjoy and brought in new signage and new furniture in the waiting room."

BCO was a willing partner to this change. Retired director Tom Morrow realized that to preserve services in the Bristol area, it needed to consider a new model. Due diligence followed hours of discussion leading to the merger. HRA would assume BCO's debts and assets.

"Timelines were a challenge," Tricarico said. "Tom and I had to look at legal and property issues,

how the funding would be transferred from BCO to DSS and from DSS back to HRA. We dealt with these challenges by meeting on a regular basis and talking about them. The transaction was amicable and went as smoothly as could be expected."

Founded in 1964, HRA of New Britain has a budget of \$18 million. Like BCO, its goal is to help impoverished individuals and families through its various programs.

Bristol Community Organization began in 1965 as the Economic Opportunities Commission, an arm of the city of Bristol. In 1971, the agency became BCO, a nonprofit agency devoted to providing services, opportunities and assistance to the less fortunate in Bristol, Burlington, Plainville, Farmington and Plymouth. Its annual budget was \$3.5 million.

Like HRA, BCO offered children's services, emergency assistance, employment and training, health and wellness and financial consultations and con-

nctions.

Tricarico said HRA plans to keep all BCO programs, even expanding to other towns and populations that have yet to be served. Tricarico said HRA-Bristol will also run HIV testing, wellness and financial literacy seminars, and a tax assistance program; the summer youth program will be expanded in Bristol.

"Think of HRA-Bristol as a new beginning for the community, rather than a post-mortem for BCO," Tricarico said.

Overall cost is less because such services as finance, human resources and planning have been centralized at HRA in New Britain. Most of the back-office functions, like payroll and grant writing, once handled in Bristol now take place in New Britain. However, three members of the Bristol community will serve on the agency's board.

"We also got the debt of this building reduced," Tricarico said of the South Street site. "We renegotiated the mortgage on the loan to Farmington Bank."