

## Unity Fund to help members stay active

The past twelve months have created a boatload of challenges for Blair County businesses. Even with some of the programs provided by the government, money has been tight and businesses have had to make tough decisions to stay financially afloat.

Despite the fact that the Blair County Chamber has played a critical role in providing information and guiding its members to available sources of funding, Chamber membership renewals are significantly down from a year ago. That's not unusual, acknowledges Richard Fiore, Jr., who chairs the Chamber's Board of Directors. "The number of businesses that have been living day-to-day is incredible," Fiore admitted. "A few of the ones that haven't renewed have told us that they aren't sure they'll still be around to take advantage of what the Chamber has to offer. They're doing their best against some tough odds."

Fiore believes the Chamber has an obligation to help. Beginning last fall, the Chamber Board authorized the staff to allow members who were unable to pay their renewals an additional three months to do so. For some, that was just enough time to get caught-up. Others still needed a boost. Fiore suggested that



the Chamber's Membership Committee consider creating a program similar to the "PA 30-Day Fund" which helped a number of small businesses with \$3,000 grants at the height of the pandemic.

The Committee complied, establishing the Chamber Unity Fund. The purpose of the Fund is to allow businesses that have reached inactive status with the Chamber to apply for funding of up to 50% of their delinquent dues.

"It's important to assist businesses in their effort to continue as Chamber members and thereby allow them to enjoy the opportunities and benefits that Chamber membership provides," believes Committee member Sherri Stayer of Altoona Lung Specialists. "To simply remove them as members is inconsistent with what this organization is all about."

Committee member Alex Seltzer of Manpower agrees.

"Manpower has been a Chamber member since 1971 and we recognize the importance of helping people who need help," he explained. "The strength of the Chamber is in its membership. When members struggle, it impacts all of



The Chamber's newly formed Membership Committee is finalizing plans for the official launch of the Chamber Unity Fund. Members of the committee are, seated, left to right: Sherri Stayer, Chris Cook, Matt Muccitelli, Jessica Sprouse, chair. Standing: Jessie Covert, Michael Cotchen, Carly Cook and Alex Seltzer.

us. The Unity Fund will make a positive difference in how quickly our business community recovers."

The fact that this initiative is taking place during Covid-19 does not mean that it's being looked at as strictly a short-term solution, emphasizes Committee member Michael Cotchen of Jersey Shore State Bank.

"The timing of the Unity Fund is the result of consequences related to Covid," he noted. "But this is not a Covid event. It is not something that ends when Covid ends. There will al-

ways be businesses that need this kind of assistance."

So where will the financial assistance come from? The hope is that businesses that have fared well during the pandemic may be willing to help those that have not. A recruiting effort is already underway to identify donors.

"We're confident that our members have a great deal of empathy for those that the pandemic has affected," stated Membership Committee Chair Jessica Sprouse of Gwin Dobson & Foreman Engi-

neers. "Because we always seem to be a community that understands the importance of paying it forward, we feel that the Unity Fund will be certain success."

The Chamber has created an application that members can download from the Chamber Website to apply for consideration of funding. That funding will be available after July 1st.

"As a board, we never want to lose members for financial reasons," Fiore reminded. "The Unity Fund helps to make sure that won't happen."

## Retired Hollidaysburg principal takes the reins of YEA! program

When Tim Gildea retired as principal at Charles W. Longer Elementary in Hollidaysburg last July, he somehow suspected that his impressive career as an educator was far from over. He was correct. In April, Gildea accepted the position of Program Manager for the Blair County Chamber's Young Entrepreneurs Academy (YEA!).

"I spent 39 wonderful years surrounded by youth," he acknowledged. "I was happiest when I was working directly with kids. As I contemplated retirement, I knew that I could stay connected with kids through substitute teaching, coaching, clubs and other opportunities. When the possibility of working with youth through the YEA! presented itself, I saw it as a great fit. In addition, I've always been fascinated with business and entrepreneurship."

Admittedly, Gildea knew very little about the YEA! program itself when Chamber President Joe Hurd approached him about the position. Over the next several weeks, he did a healthy share of research.

"I wanted to be sure that I knew what I was getting into," he pointed out. "I found that YEA! opens doors that too often are not understood and explored



Tim Gildea, the new Program Manager of YEA!, talks to Carol Gensimore, chair of the YEA! Committee. Gildea has been an educator for the past 39-years.

by our young population. They just do not know what is possible. YEA! spells-out these possibilities in a very comprehensive and organized fashion. It connects our youth in Blair County with business leaders of all kinds. Thanks to YEA!, young people will walk away from this program with options that most certainly will play a big part in the rest of their lives."

He's looking forward to helping make that happen.

"With so many business leaders in the community involved, my biggest challenge will be knowing when to get out of the way."

As Program Manager, Gildea succeeds Royce Boyd who held that position for the past four years.

Boyd, he admitted, will be a tough act to follow.

"A savvy leader looks for new positions where they'll be replacing someone that has been ineffective and lacking in creativity and innovation," Gildea disclosed. "Unfortunately for me, this doesn't describe in any way, the leader I will be following as Program Manager. All who know and love Royce Boyd understand that she is an amazing leader. I am already feeling the pressure of maintaining all that she has established in the Young Entrepreneurs program."

Gildea and his wife Lori have five children (Joel, Corey, Ellyn, Caleb and Peter) and four grandchildren (Emma, Bryson, Lucy and Winnie)

## Breakfast Club to focus on impact of Covid-19



Dr. Robert Gildea

As the Blair County Chamber looks for new ways to address the county's workforce challenges, a critical component of that future workforce is facing challenges of its own, courtesy of Covid-19.

"It's obvious that the pandemic has disrupted the normal flow of instruction in our local schools," acknowledged Chamber President Joe Hurd. "What's not always talked about when our schools are discussed is the psychological impact that Covid-19 is having on our students and our educators. It should be the elephant-in-the-room. Too often it's pushed to the background."

To raise awareness of the situation, the Chamber's monthly Breakfast Club will feature a tag team presentation with two speakers who are well aware of the gravity of the problem. Dr. Robert Gildea is superintendent of the Hollidaysburg Area



Dana Melton, RN, LCSW

School District; Dana Melton, RN, LCSW is a therapist treating most behavioral health issues. Each has a perspective that adds to the discussion.

"Attendees will be shocked by the information that will be part of the presentation," Hurd pointed out. "The repercussions are far-reaching. Before we can focus our attention on career development in our schools, we need to prioritize the mental and emotional health of our young people and the people who teach them."

The Breakfast Club begins at 7:45 a.m. at The Casino at Lakemont Park. The cost to attend is \$20 for Chamber members and \$30 for non-members. A buffet breakfast is included. To register, call the Chamber at (814) 943-8151 or register online at [www.blairchamber.com](http://www.blairchamber.com).

Corporate sponsor of the Breakfast Club for May is South Hills School of Business & Technology.

