



SWEET BEGINNINGS

Sweet Beginnings was among the first six organizations to receive a loan through Benefit Chicago. The for-profit subsidiary of the North Lawndale Employment Network is well-known for its honey-based skin care products and its work with returning citizens and other employment-challenged community residents.

With its products sold at Mariano's, Ten Thousand Villages, Sugar Beet Food Co-op and several online venues, the popularity of Sweet Beginning's products was never in question. However, the organization lacked sufficient resources to increase the number of hives, production space and, most important, the workforce to fully realize its mission.

According to Brenda Palms-Barber, founder and CEO of Sweet Beginnings, Benefit Chicago made the hoped-for growth possible. "Developing a detailed growth plan, experiencing the rigor of the underwriting process and establishing proof of a social and financial return on investment were all a part of our application process. We were fortunate enough to be ready, and the approval has validated our cause and model," she said.



The resulting \$500,000 loan has allowed the organization to pursue the growth it could only dream of before. "Prior to Benefit Chicago, we were seen as a cute, boutique company," said Palms-Barber. "But this investment has given us the strength and credibility to be taken seriously. We can now adequately finance our growth, and in the next year we're hoping to expand 2-3 times our size and double our staff."

The \$500,000 loan has allowed the organization to create forward momentum in leveraging recent successes. In 2017 alone, revenues increased by 27 percent over the previous year and two new employees were added. Palms-Barber said, "With business growing, our success has improved people's lives and built a stronger community."

Since Sweet Beginnings opened its doors six years ago, more than 500 men and women have been hired and less than four percent have returned to prison – compared to a national recidivism rate of 65 percent.



"We are connecting people who have faced barriers in their life with opportunities that will bring them success," added Palms-Barber. "We want to be an economic engine that is improving and restoring the quality of life here locally."

Beyond the 90,000 bees and 60 hives cared for by onsite beekeepers in North Lawndale, the business also sources from two locally-operated honey farmers and manages four additional apiaries, one of which is located at O'Hare International Airport.

['Sweet Beginnings' helping former inmates get beekeeper jobs right out of prison](#)

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