



North Lawndale Employment Network

Creating a Community That Works

Chief Operating Officer and President, Social Enterprises
North Lawndale Employment Network
Chicago, Illinois

"There is something about the ancient profession of beekeeping that seemed to be the perfect analogy with people returning from incarceration. Like returning citizens, honey bees are often villainized due to fear and stigma, but they pose little threat to the public. Honey bees, like our participants, draw nectar from both flowers and weeds, seeing no difference in either one. Some may only see the remnants of a once bustling community, but honey bees and people searching for a better tomorrow have the ability to find something sweet in even the most unlikely environments." - Brenda Palms, CEO, NLEN

THE SEARCH

North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN), an innovative economic justice nonprofit based in the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago, seeks a relational, strategic, and entrepreneurial leader to be its inaugural Chief Operating Officer (COO) and President of its Social Enterprises. The COO & President will join an organization that has distinguished itself as a nationally recognized workforce development and social enterprise trailblazer and a force for economic advancement and improved quality of life for residents in North Lawndale and beyond. It is an exciting moment at NLEN as the organization prepares to significantly expand its reach and scale its impact.

NLEN recently celebrated 25 years of transformative service to community members who are unemployed, formerly incarcerated, asset-limited, and/or income-constrained. The organization assists these individuals in securing employment and developing the skills to successfully navigate the job market, maintain fulfilling long-term employment, achieve educational ambitions, and build household wealth. NLEN empowers low-income job seekers with access to financial tools, digital literacy, and other supports, and partners with employers in recruiting and retaining employees. In 2024, NLEN served 1,642 clients, offered 921 financial services and workshops, and hired 40 transitional workers. Three out of five clients increased their monthly income, net worth, and FICO score. NLEN has an FY25 operating budget of \$7.5 million and 46 permanent employees, more than 20 percent of whom are NLEN program graduates.

Of fundamental strategic importance to NLEN's mission are its groundbreaking Social Enterprises, Sweet Beginnings, LLC, and the beelove® café. Sweet Beginnings is a wholly owned subsidiary of NLEN offering full-time transitional jobs to citizens returning from incarceration who face barriers to employment. Sweet Beginnings manages apiaries (bee farms) throughout Chicagoland, produces honey for consumption, and manufactures and sells all-natural honey-based skincare products. Sweet Beginnings honey is an essential ingredient at the beelove® café, opened at NLEN's headquarters in 2021. The café

has become a cherished community hub, providing a friendly gathering space and critical work opportunities to transitional employees. In 2024, NLEN's Social Enterprises employed 12 participants.

The COO & President will report to and work closely with NLEN's dynamic President and Chief Executive Officer, who also serves as the CEO of the Social Enterprises, to achieve a thriving and sustainable organizational structure and realize maximum impact and profitability for the Social Enterprises. The COO & President will lead daily operations, develop systems to mature administrative functions, and introduce critical efficiencies. They will nurture strong and reliable teams, build more robust and efficient cross-team collaboration, and cultivate a culture of performance, accountability, and community care.

The COO & President will be energized by the prospect of investing in and expanding the scope and scale of the Social Enterprises, attending equally to each element of its "triple bottom line:" excellent outcomes for participants, community economic revitalization, and high-quality production. The ideal candidate will bring exceptional organizational management and development skills, an enterprising approach, and a history of honoring diverse lived experiences and empowering people, especially those who are low-income and have been impacted by the carceral system.

KEY OBJECTIVES FOR THE COO & PRESIDENT

The COO & President position is a newly created and pivotal role at NLEN, intended to help knit the organization together while setting and achieving strategic and operational objectives. The COO & President will partner closely with the CEO, working with her to drive forward the organization and enabling her to focus increasingly on dynamic external representation with complete confidence that NLEN is positioned to thrive internally. While the portfolio of the position may evolve as priorities are developed and refined, the COO & President is currently charged with the following objectives:

Partner with the CEO to ensure the long-term vitality of NLEN and its Social Enterprises.

- Lead NLEN's operations and the Social Enterprise's strategic direction, including business development.
- Ensure that NLEN and the Social Enterprises are exceptionally well equipped to provide high-quality, life-changing experiences for participants, and that everyone who walks through the organization's doors can easily connect to and access a wide variety of supports.
- Shape systems and staff roles and responsibilities to create an effective and efficient organizational structure. Invest in NLEN's administrative functions, including human resources (HR), facilities, and information technology (IT).
- Develop and implement feedback and outcome assessment mechanisms and proactively utilize data to assess progress toward meeting business goals.
- Provide regular updates to the NLEN board of directors, including progress on operational development, strategic direction, and the performance and impact of the Social Enterprises.

Staff and partner with the social enterprise board committee.

Expertly scale the impact and reach of the Social Enterprises.

- Develop and execute a comprehensive business strategy to scale the Social Enterprises and meet the growing demand from prospective clients eager to participate in the Social Enterprise programs, as well as the demand from retailers, corporate partners, and consumers for beelove® honey products. Achieve double-digit revenue growth while maximizing social impact.
- Oversee the production and distribution of beelove® honey and skincare products, maintaining the highest quality, safety, and compliance standards.
- Ensure exceptional operational performance of the beelove® café and event space, delivering outstanding customer experiences.
- Lead the process of transitioning the beelove® café into a wholly owned subsidiary so that it can more easily expand and the model can be replicated elsewhere.

Position NLEN and its Social Enterprises to effectively recruit and retain dedicated, mission-driven, and competent staff at every level.

- Invest in a broad range of professional development supports for staff and create a strategy for organizational succession planning.
- Foster a culture of performance and accountability, and employ a person-centered, trauma-informed approach to staff engagement. Improve internal communication and cross-functional collaboration.
- Ensure productive operations within the Social Enterprises amidst frequent turnover, a feature of the transitional nature of its programs. Mentor talented and committed transitional workers.

Develop critical external partnerships across an array of key constituencies.

- Identify and help secure diverse funding opportunities, including grants, investments, and strategic partnerships.
- Lead marketing and branding strategies and cultivate trusting relationships with corporate partners, investors, donors, community organizations, and government agencies to amplify the reach and impact of Sweet Beginnings and the beelove® café.

QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

While no individual will possess every quality, the successful candidate will bring many of the following qualifications, professional experiences, and personal attributes:

- A closely held belief that every community can and should flourish and that everyone deserves access to good jobs that offer opportunities for advancement, benefits, and a safe and respectful work environment. A passion for workforce development and economic justice.

- Demonstrated accomplishment at the senior level within a mission-driven organization of a size and complexity similar to NLEN. Experience with social enterprises is desirable.
- Demonstrated ability to develop a thought partnership with an enterprising and inspirational President & CEO.
- Expertise in successfully translating a vision and strategy into a practical plan, with concrete implementation methods and measures of anticipated outcomes. Highly developed analytical skills, with experience driving effective use of data.
- In-depth knowledge of best practices in organizational development and design. Understanding of key administrative functions, including HR, IT, and facilities management.
- Strong financial acumen and demonstrated aptitude for developing budgets, negotiating contracts, managing financial performance, and creating business development strategies. Proficiency in inventory management systems, e-commerce platforms, and financial software is desirable.
- Appetite to scale businesses, achieve revenue growth and profitability, and manage profit and loss. The ability to champion innovation in product development, customer experience, and operational processes.
- Expertise in building and sustaining collaborative, mutually beneficial external partnerships.
- The ability to persuasively convey the urgency and value of the Social Enterprise mission to prospective business partners, retailers, customers, community members, investors, and others.
- Capability to guide, support, and advance both permanent and transitional staff. Success in building safe and courageous spaces to reflect on progress, growth areas, and aspirations.
- Professional or lived experience working with those who face barriers to employment, have a history with the criminal legal system, have experienced trauma, and/or are low-income.
- Results-oriented, innovative, and self-motivated, with the capacity to engage in creative thinking while managing everyday practicalities with good humor.
- Emotional intelligence, patience, persistence, empathy, and the ability to engender trust.
- Experience working with or serving on governing or advisory boards is desirable.

EMPLOYMENT DETAILS

Salary Range: \$240,000-\$260,000

Location: Residing within a daily commutable distance of NLEN's headquarters in the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago is required.

APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

All nominations, inquiries, and applications (including a resume and a letter of interest responding to the objectives outlined above) should be directed in strict confidence to the search team below.

Applications will be reviewed as they are submitted. For additional information about NLEN, please refer

to the appendix.

Jeff Kessner and Tatiana Oberkoetter
Isaacson, Miller

NLEN Chief Operating Officer & President, Social Enterprises Search

NLEN CORE VALUES

Neighborhood-focused employment initiatives are fundamental.

Successful programs are neighborhood-focused and community-driven so they meet the specific needs of individuals.

Quality of work matters.

People who work hard should not be poor. A full-time job must meet basic needs and offer conditions for engagement, advancement, and respect.

Economic mobility is essential to reducing poverty.

Family support and financial literacy are core to addressing economic insecurity, which disproportionately affects African American, Latino, and other families of color. Economic insecurity is not only impacting the poor; it has grown to threaten the middle class. Self-employment and entrepreneurship are critically important economic mobility strategies to generate income and boost household finances.

We must address the racial wealth gap and social inequality.

The United States' history of racially charged public policy has created the modern racial wealth divide not just through the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, but through the more recent race-based discrimination in hiring, housing subsidies, tax subsidies, and veteran benefits as well as other implicitly and explicitly racist public policies.

Everyone deserves human dignity and empowerment.

To uphold this belief, we do all of our work in a manner that values human dignity and eliminates shame, humiliation, and stigma by building on the strengths that help our participants and community survive loss and trauma and rebalance the power dynamic between participants and authority figures.

APPENDIX

ABOUT NLEN

North Lawndale Employment Network was founded in 1999 through an 18-month community planning effort led by the Steans Family Foundation to serve the unmet employment needs of the North Lawndale community. The predominantly Black North Lawndale neighborhood is rich in history, culture, and community, yet has suffered from a high rate of financial poverty linked to racial and economic wealth disparities. Today, approximately 38 percent of North Lawndale households live below the federal poverty line, and 57 percent of adults have a history with the criminal legal system. Of NLEN's clients, 100 percent are low-income, 94 percent are African American, and 34 percent are justice-involved.

Brenda Palms has served as the President & CEO of NLEN since its establishment and is the founding entrepreneur behind its Social Enterprises. During Palms's tenure, NLEN has grown from two to nearly 50 employees and has received numerous awards, including the MacArthur Foundation Award and the Bank of America Neighborhood Builders Award. Her innovative approach, commitment to social impact, and inspirational leadership have cemented NLEN as one of Chicago's most respected nonprofits. Today, NLEN serves over 2,000 people annually to address the root causes of poverty, bridge the racial wealth gap, and drive social equity and racial healing on Chicago's West Side.

Programs

NLEN is an essential community resource with programs and services that are sought after by clients and employers from across Chicago. NLEN's flagship program is Craft Your Path, which provides comprehensive job readiness training, work-based learning experience, professional mentorship, wraparound services, and an \$8,000 education stipend to job-seekers ages 18 to 24 who are not in school. Path to Prosperity is NLEN's accelerated program for experienced job-seekers, and Moving Forward is its diesel mechanic skills training course operated in partnership with the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA). Participants also have the opportunity to gain hands-on experience as a rail or bus servicer through CTA's Second Chance Apprenticeship program.

NLEN operates the Financial Opportunity Center, which delivers financial planning and economic empowerment services, and the Digital Resource Center, which provides job-seekers with the digital access and skills needed for life and work. Through its Business Solutions Department, NLEN works directly with employers on recruitment, screening, hiring, and staffing support. Employer partners are eligible for incentives, including employee wage subsidies and the Work Opportunity Tax Credit.

NLEN provides energy and utility assistance to the surrounding community via a partnership with the Community and Economic Development Association of Cook County (CEDA) and access to fresh

groceries via a collaboration with Nourishing Hope. The organization is also engaged in violence prevention, community health, and education access efforts, and offers free broadband to residents within a 1.5-mile radius. To inform the broader field and its mission, NLEN has participated in multiple research reports on employment, community development, and environmental justice.

Social Enterprises

NLEN's Social Enterprises are rooted in an asset-based approach to resident wealth creation and community regeneration. Founded in 2004 by CEO Brenda Palms, Sweet Beginnings, LLC is a high-quality and sustainable business that produces beelove®, a Certified Naturally Grown and all-natural line of raw, urban honey and honey-infused skincare products. The enterprise's apiaries are located throughout the Chicago area, including North Lawndale, O'Hare International Airport, Roosevelt University Schaumburg Campus, and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County Trailside Museum. Sweet Beginnings participants harvest honey; create, package, and ship beelove® products; track inventory; fill product orders; sell at retail outlets such as Whole Foods; and perform quality control.

In August 2021, NLEN opened its new workforce development campus in Homan Square. In addition to NLEN's administrative offices and training and event space, the campus houses Sweet Beginnings' 3,300-square-foot state-of-the-art production facility. Also situated on campus is the beelove® café, an inclusive and uplifting community gathering space where customers enjoy handcrafted beverages and meals.

Through positions with Sweet Beginnings and the beelove® café, participants learn all the qualities required in a permanent job through positions that are purposefully transitional in nature (tenures average three months). About 15-20 transitional participants are employed by the Social Enterprises at any one time, and many are graduates of other NLEN programs. The enterprises have received national recognition for their results; less than 10 percent of those participating in the programs return to prison within three years, compared to the Illinois average of about 40 percent.

Organizational Details

NLEN is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization headquartered in Chicago, Illinois. More than two-thirds of its budget is derived from foundation and corporate income, and the remainder is from a combination of government contracts, private contributions, investments, rental income, and other sources. Sweet Beginnings, LLC is a wholly owned subsidiary of NLEN, and the beelove® café is currently embedded as a program of NLEN. The enterprises' combined FY2025 net revenue is about \$625,000.

NLEN has a permanent staff of 46, and the Social Enterprises currently employ seven permanent staff. The Chief Operating Officer and President of the Social Enterprises will partner closely with their colleagues on the senior team, key external consultants, and community partners. The organization is governed by an 11-member board of directors and supported by a 15-member associate board.