News

by Heather Morrison

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This story was updated at 2:15 p.m. CT with quotes from Gregory R. Kepferle, CEO of Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County.

The Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship at Santa Clara University in California has been running short workshops for social entrepreneurs all over the world. Now, through a partnership with Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County, a pilot program is coming to the United States.

"Even in the worldwide capital of innovation, many suffer from lack of access to basic resources," said Cassandra Staff, chief operating officer of Miller Center.

The San Francisco Bay Area GSBI Boost is a free, three-day, workshop for up to 40 social entrepreneurs "who are positively impacting the lives of those in need in the San Francisco Bay Area." The workshop will focus on strategic thinking, business plans, growth and long-term financial sustainability. Plus, attendees will also have the opportunity to attend networking events.

"Not only will these leaders work directly with Silicon Valley mentors," said Gregory R. Kepferle, CEO of Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County, "they will have a rare chance to collaborate with and learn from other leaders who are working to create innovative solutions to poverty in our area."

Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County has deep rooted connections from its 12 years of working on this issue in the Bay Area. Kepferle wants to use these

relationships to encourage organizations to get involved and ultimately help new groups.

"We believe that with their [Miller Center] global expertise and our connections to the local community that we could spark, hopefully, a revolution here locally," Kepferle said.

Organizations can be for-profit, nonprofit or a hybrid and do not have to be affiliated with the Catholic Church. The main requirement is that the organization focuses on solutions that impact "vulnerable, low-income and/or underserved populations."

After the event, the pilot program will continue for up to 20 organizations by extending its participation with a six-month online program to help organizations develop business models and strategies to continue to grow. In addition to the online program, each organization with also be provided with mentors and will have the opportunity to present at an Investor Showcase in Silicon Valley.

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But, it won't stop in California. If the pilot program succeeds, Kepferle said there are dreams of expanding the program nationally, working with Catholic Charities all over the country.

"Just because somebody is poor today, doesn't mean they have to be poor tomorrow," Kepferle said. "Living in poverty, doesn't mean they don’t have ambition and drive. This gives people that opportunity to create work, create income and assets to get out of poverty."

Thane Kreiner, executive director of Miller Center, said the Miller Center began thinking about bringing this type of programming to the United States after the 2015 election, when they noticed people were feeling "disenfranchised."

"We asked the question of whether or not social entrepreneurial approaches might be a mechanism to heal some of the division in the United States," Kreiner said.

And that's how the Miller Center's programing under the umbrella of Social Justice in the United States got started, he said.

The Miller Center is currently hosting more programs than ever before, Kreiner said. Founded in 1997, it has raised $580 million in investments and helped 259 million people, according to the Miller Center website.

Applications are open until June 1, with the program taking place July 24-26, in San Jose, California.

[Heather Adams is a freelance reporter based in Los Angeles. She loves talking about religion and can be found doing so on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.]