

Ochs Center resurfaces with new, narrowed mission

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The Ochs Center for Metropolitan Studies, which went under the radar after closing its doors in 2015, is resurfacing with a narrowed mission and new funding model.

After the recession, nonprofit funders had less to give and wanted bang for their buck. So many foundations, in order to make more data-based decisions, began requiring the nonprofit organizations receiving their funds to conduct research and report results, and meeting the demand for studies to secure funding will now be the Ochs Center's financial lifeline. "When you need a third-party person to come in and look at how a program is doing, we want to be that ... independent reviewer," said Dave Buck, an Ochs Center board member who is also executive director of the Chattanooga Autism Center. "We want people to use us."

The nonprofit research center, founded as the Metropolitan Council for Community Services in 1962, had been known for publishing State of the Chattanooga Region reports and using local data to highlight inequities in public schools, reveal the growing economic disparities between Blacks and whites and provide insight into the city's gang problems before its foundation funding dried up.

For the past several years, after reorganizing, it has been quietly working on projects behind the scenes in partnership with the University of Tennessee in Knoxville College of Social Work's Office of Research and Public Service, where the center's new director, Maryanne Cunningham, worked for 38 years until retiring as associate director in 2020.

"For a long time, we were trying to figure out how to stabilize and move forward again," Benjamin Pits, a commercial real estate agent and longtime Ochs Center board member said. "It has been a rough road, but I really feel like there is a need today, more than ever, for something like the Ochs Center."

The center's all part-time staff, which include program evaluators, education specialists, sociologists, computer scientists, statisticians, and economists, are working virtually, and the work will be financially supported by the nonprofit and government agencies that pay them to conduct research, Cunningham said.

"What makes us unique is that we will collaborate with an agency to do the grant proposal writing, but if they are funded, we want to be their external evaluator."

Recently, the center has worked on several projects for Signal Centers, including helping design a database system and conduct a racial equity organizational assessment, as well as several large statewide program evaluations for the Tennessee Department of Human Services. The Ochs Center has also done focus group work around vaccine hesitancy for the Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga and did a needs assessment and a four-year implementation plan for the reentry program in the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office, Cunningham said. "The staff are equipped to apply their expertise to a variety of issues nonprofits and local governments are addressing," she said.

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