



DOF Loan Helps a Growing Nonprofit on its Journey to Assist Autistic Adults

In 2006, Ami Taubenfeld and eight other families in the Baltimore City/County region of Maryland were faced with a sobering reality: their autistic children were on the verge of exiting from their school systems—what would come next for them? They developed a committee dedicated to researching the options available to them.

The existing agencies Taubenfeld and the others researched were designed to serve adults with a wide variety of disabilities but unfortunately lacked the expertise to handle autistic clients. “You know, children with autism become adults with autism,” Ami said. “We wanted them to be able to retain—and build on—the skills they had developed in school.”

Over 500,000 autistic students will exit their school systems over the next decade, and the options for adult supports are extremely limited. Very few adult providers have the extensive experience needed to support the full spectrum of autistic adults. “The wrap-around services they had in school, such as speech, occupational therapy, and social work ends as soon as they exit school,” explained Ami. “In the autism world, this is known as ‘falling off the cliff.’”

The cohort of nine families eventually founded [Itineris](#), an agency focused on evidence-based programs that support autistic adults so they can live their most meaningful lives as independently as possible. With a name taken from the Latin for “the journey,” the agency’s mission is to empower adults on the spectrum to live meaningful lives throughout their lifespan. “Our goal when we first got started was to make sure that the child didn’t lose skill and could remain at a maintenance level,” Ami, now Executive Director of Itineris, said. “What we had not anticipated was the tremendous growth we saw.”



At a Glance

CDFI: The Disability Opportunity Fund (DOF)

Location: Rockville Centre, NY

Borrower: Itineris

Location: Baltimore, MD

Product/Service: Real estate loan to finance their building purchase

Loan Received: 2019

Itineris, an agency focused on supporting autistic adults in developing skills to obtain meaningful jobs engage in their community, work on social skills and adult independent living skills had grown too large for their space. They wanted to purchase their building so they could expand their programming and increase the number of clients served.

Itineris turned to DOF, whose \$2.6 million loan and technical assistance helped secure additional funding from the Harry and Jeannette Weinberg Foundation to make the purchase.



That growth—in their clients’ independence, language skills, interpersonal relationships, behavior support, social activities, and more—far exceeded the founders’ expectations. By 2017, the agency’s clients and programs had outgrown the facility where it was housed, so Itineris decided to purchase their building when it came up for sale. However, they had limited time to act, and their capital raise was falling short of their goal.

“Readiness to work.”

Enter [The Disability Opportunity Fund](#) (DOF), a national CDFI (community development financial institution) based in Rockville Centre, NY that was recommended to Itineris by a funder. DOF’s mission is to provide technical and financial services to organizations that increase access to affordable housing, schools, community facilities, and other services to people with disabilities. The CDFI was launched in 2007 by Charlie Hammerman, a former Assistant US Attorney, Merrill Lynch investment professional, and father of a disabled child who has brought his business acumen and compassion to the fore in helping DOF achieve its mission.



“Itineris was in a real race against time because they didn’t want to lose the building they were leasing, and the owner wanted to sell quickly,” said Charlie. “They couldn’t rely on a traditional bank mortgage because they didn’t have the equity they needed.”



Itineris also had the promise of a grant from the [Harry and Jeannette Weinberg Foundation](#), which would cover a third of the total cost of the building, but Itineris would first need to secure financing for the purchase. “The grant was an amazing opportunity, but we first had to prove we could raise at least half of the building’s total purchase price,” recalled Ami. “We were walking into the whole thing a bit blind, to be honest, and Charlie really impressed us with his readiness to work.”

DOF provided a loan of \$2.6 million, which covered half of the purchase price to meet the Weinberg Foundation's grant requirement. "We provided 100% loan to value loan, interest-only for a time so they could secure the property. And that was critical to us," said Charlie.

"He was like an angel with wings who came in at the right time," Ami added.

"Flexible capital and a quick response."

Itineris was able to purchase their building and, since they now owned it, were soon able to secure additional funding to repay the DOF loan in full ahead of schedule, as well as the remainder of their mortgage. "We were able to secure a mortgage, then take the time to increase our grant funding and grow our individual capital campaign giving," said Ami. "The DOF capital, along with the Weinberg Foundation funding, gave us the credibility for the community to support us and believe in what we were doing."

"We were thrilled to help them," recalled Charlie. "I mean, that's the role of a CDFI, isn't it? Flexible capital and a quick response when it's needed."

Today, the two organizations maintain a close relationship, with DOF a sponsor of Itineris' annual gala, among other things. Ami Taubenfeld will always be grateful. "DOF believed in us at a crucial time in our growth," she said. "You know, we get calls almost daily from folks who want to start programs like ours, and the first thing I recommend to them is to partner with a CDFI."



**Learn how you can help bridge the CDFI and disability communities.
Contact us today: info@disability-finance.org**

**National Disability Finance Coalition
www.disability-finance.org**