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LOCAL NEWS

July 2nd, 2026

Roxbury McDonald's dining room reopens with programs aimed at supporting youth

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With assistance from community groups, the Washington Mall McDonald's on Warren Street reopened with prize packs for the incoming students. PHOTO: ANDRE STARK

Upon walking into the McDonald's on Warren Street in Roxbury, customers witness features of any fast-food burger joint: the sound of sizzling patties on a grill, the lingering aroma of french fries doused in salt, the hustle of employees filling orders behind the counter.

But for over a year, customers also witnessed fights among teenagers that grew out of control. Some vandalized the restaurant's furniture, which employees reupholstered several times. Overwhelmed and thinking they'd exhausted all options, managers decided to close the dining room between 1 and 5 p.m. on weekdays, limiting patrons to the drive-thru and mobile pickup windows.

Now, the dining room has reopened but with a unique feature that's set to be a mainstay at 301 Warren: programming for youth intended to prevent violence and promote leadership.

Thomas Koonce, director of re-entry and violence prevention at the Center for Teen Empowerment (TE), mentors young people involved in the justice system and helps them meet their stability needs. He said that supporting students in this way and bringing that support closer to them allows them to find their voices, build responsibility and change mindsets.



Task force members gather to celebrate the reopening. (From left) Sheila S. Boston Public Schools, Benedict Pierre, Suffolk County DA's office, Migdalia Nalls, Suffolk County DA's office, Alexa Santana, office of City Councilor Miniard Culpepper, Boston Police Superintendent, Juana Hernandez, Neicy Allen, Roxbury YMCA, Michael Kozu, Project R.I.G.H.T., Izzy Morrero, Boston Public Schools PHOTO: SUFFOLK COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE

"It can show them that they have the ability to do anything that they want to do," Koonce said. "They can be beacons in the community, they can be giving back to the community, they can add to the community rather than detract or take away from the community."

Migdala Nalls, juvenile unit chief of the Suffolk County district attorney's office, referred to the effort as a collective one. "This is a community problem. Our teens should be allowed to use the establishment in those areas," she

said.

Nalls joined forces with Vijay Selhi and his sons, Cherag and Anurag, and youth-centered community organizations to offer a space for teens to

hang out on weekday afternoons — one that is safe, affordable and allows them to engage with their community again.

The collaboration began when Nalls reached out to the Selhi family, co-owner of the restaurant, almost immediately after she learned of the dining room's closure in late April. She originally hoped for the dining room to reopen in September, but the Selhis, who own 19 McDonald's locations, insisted on making the space available to teens before summer vacation began, Nalls said.

"When we spoke to them, they were very committed to keeping that Roxbury McDonald's open and working with the community to find ways to reopen those Monday-through-Friday hours, which are prime hours for business," Nalls said.

The Selhi family could not be reached for an interview.

Nalls told the Banner she arranged a meeting with leaders from the Boston Police Department, Boston School Police and the Selhis to strategize a way to reopen the dining room. The group determined that community partners needed to be involved, citing programs such as homework tutoring and "coffee with a cop" in other McDonald's locations as ones that engaged young customers. After meeting with some local organizers, a plan was hatched and the dining room reopened on Monday, June 22.

During the reopening, representatives of several local organizations offered students "swag bags" and spoke with them about their projects and programming — these organizations include the YMCA; the Center for Teen Empowerment, which specializes in social organizing and community improvement; and Project R.I.G.H.T., which works to engage youth in

neighborhood stabilization and economic development efforts. Boston police officers also spoke with young customers and restaurant employees offered students job applications.

Community organizers will spend the summer experimenting with programming on weekday afternoons, with some ideas including paint nights, engagement with community organizations, mentorship and simply taking the time to listen to teens to understand their needs and concerns.

Koonce believes the initiative is bigger than the local McDonald's and hopes other businesses and community organizations get involved.

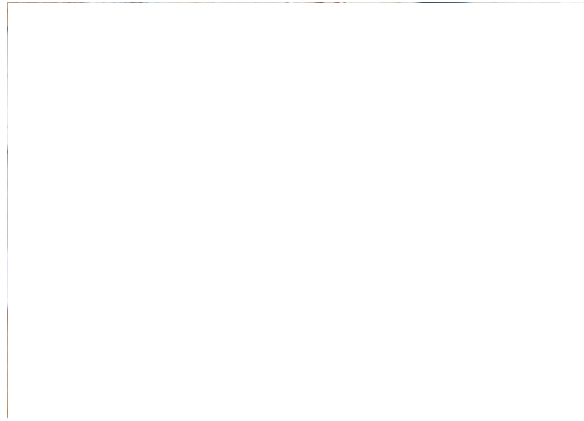
"TE has been doing this for many, many years, many decades, and we see that empowerment works. ... It's kind of like they're paying it forward," Koonce said. "It starts this cyclical change in our community for the better."

In a statement, District Attorney Kevin Hayden expressed his appreciation for the Selhis, saying he understood the importance of successful businesses to communities.

"They bring jobs, convenience, meeting places and more to the neighborhoods around them," Hayden said. "When they close, even for

short periods, the impact is felt. That's why we're so happy to support the Selhi family and so grateful for their presence."

McDonald's, **roxbury**



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