

The Huntsville Times

A 'lifeline' for local entrepreneurs

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Small-biz centers at A&M, UAH offer many free services

Otis Harty wanted to start a company someday.

When he lost his job in a downsizing, though, his plans for stepping out on his own became more immediate.

"Getting laid off was actually a gift, a godsend," said Harty, who was a senior director of global information technology for Sanmina-SCI. "Once I was laid off, I had total clarity."

He launched a home-based IT business, Agilis Infrastructures, in March.

The aspiring entrepreneur had some guidance from the Small Business Development Centers at Alabama A&M University and the University of Alabama in Huntsville. The Huntsville centers are among 10 SBDC locations at universities across the state that are members of the Alabama Small Business Development Center Network.

The centers provide free services such as business counseling, training and mentoring and help with tasks such as writing proposals and business plans and preparing a loan package.

Between the two centers, Harty got help developing a business plan and Web site and was provided contacts of prime contractors and subcontractors in the area. With the help of UAH's center, Harty is taking advantage of a service that notifies him daily by e-mail about government opportunities that match his company's capabilities.

"Our mission is to build the infrastructure of a small business so it is competitive in today's market and to reduce the failure rate of small businesses," said Cassandra Zeigler, interim director of A&M's SBDC.

Zeigler said the A&M center, which in fiscal 2009 counseled 165 people and worked with another 300 in training sessions, is moving beyond its original focus of guiding startups. She wants to use a "process-driving approach" to help businesses create comprehensive business development plans that will carry them as they develop and mature. She wants the center to maintain an ongoing relationship with the companies.

"A business is like a home - it requires continuous improvement," she said.

William Campbell Jr., director of the Alabama Small Business Development Center Network, said guiding small businesses and new entrepreneurs is an important mission.

"Small, innovative businesses create the backbone of the economy," said Campbell, who spoke at an economic development conference in Huntsville last week.

Ninety-seven percent of all Alabama companies are considered small businesses, or those with fewer than 500 employees. And small businesses employ about half of the private-sector workers, he said, and create 60 percent of wage growth.

"Our centers are seeing increased activity, whether a client is getting help with a business plan or preparing a loan package," Campbell said.

Since 2001, the 10 Alabama centers have educated, counseled or trained 125,000 businesses and individuals, Campbell said, and more than \$10 billion in contracts has been awarded to clients.

In all, 1,738 people took part in counseling and training at UAH's SBDC in fiscal 2009. Also housed there is a Procurement Technical Assistance Center, helping small businesses that are interested in government contracting. Its services include assistance in lining up registrations and certifications required for government work.

About half of the people the UAH center works with are government contracting clients. They are provided contact information for prime contractors and government agencies' small-business program offices in this area, said Mary Jane Fleming, a procurement specialist.

"The bottom line," said Jeff Smith, associate director of UAH's center, "is we offer entrepreneurs or those who want to be entrepreneurs assistance and guidance and coaching on how to go about starting a business and starting a business the correct way so they'll be successful."

Harty, who now has 10 contractors working with Agilis, is grateful for the startup assistance he received at both small-business centers. The personnel, he said, were always accessible, regardless of his questions.

"It's like having a lifeline right here."

The Alabama Small Business Development Center Network is a statewide, inter-institutional program designed to enhance economic growth in Alabama by providing management and technical assistance to small businesses. Certified business counselors are available in 12 Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) located at our member university partners across the state.

ASBDC members include SBDCs at Alabama A & M University, Alabama State University, Auburn University, Jacksonville State University, Troy University, University of Alabama, University of Alabama in Huntsville, University of North Alabama, University of South Alabama, and University of West Alabama.

To contact a counselor in your area, please call 877-UAL-SBDC (825-7232) or visit our website at www.ASBDC.org.