

## **Programs to Help Minority Businesses**

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Mike Oliver has a great business idea, but he's not exactly sure what to do with it. The East Side clothing designer already has his small line of designer T-shirts and hoodies in a couple of small, locally owned clothing shops. Now, he wants to expand his line and open a store, but the next steps are more questions than plans.

"We don't know how to meet our goal to be in small boutiques nationwide or how to expand our brand," he said.

The sentiments are shared by many minority business owners, according to a study the Columbus Chamber plans to release this week.

To help address questions and concerns like Oliver's, the chamber created its Diversity Bridge program, which is being introduced today, to connect minority business owners with the help needed to advance their business dreams.

"We can't achieve a 21st century city if we don't take advantage of a diverse population," said Michael Gordon, the chamber's vice president for business development. "We've got to provide better access to information and networks."

The plan includes creating a Web site that lists information on minority certification, partnerships and funding resources, Gordon said. And the chamber will track minority business development to see where additional help is needed.

The project is just one of a series of workshops and programs starting this month designed to promote minority business development and to expand established minority-owned businesses.

Also collaborating to aid minority businesses are the U.S. Small Business Administration, Urban League and the Ohio Department of Development.

Their goal, organizers say, is to lead to the creation of more jobs.

In central Ohio, Columbus has 6,696 black-owned firms, the most of any Ohio city, according to U.S. Census figures. Columbus also leads the state in the growth of Latino-owned businesses, which increased by 130 percent from 1997 to 2002, according to the census.

The city also has a significant Asian-owned business presence, with 1,468 such companies; 308 local businesses are owned by American Indians.

While those are positive figures, the need still exists for more business development, said William Davis, a development specialist with the U.S. Small Business Administration. The agency also is offering minority-business development seminars, these with the Columbus Urban League.

Business owners "pay dearly for what they don't know," Davis said. "Programs like this help businesses learn the who, what, where, why and how to access the help they need in order to grow and survive."

The program offers monthly seminars on funding and how to open a business and expand it.

For Columbus area businessmen such as Davis DeClouet, the seminars are a godsend. DeClouet, who has owned Giddy-Up Go Termite and Pest control for 10 years, wants to more effectively market his business. He mortgaged his home to start the business and is now looking for ways to expand it.

"It's a struggle for a small business to find a way to get to the next level," the North Side resident said, after attending the first Urban League seminar. "I heard some great ideas here and made good contacts that I hope will help me. "

On another front, the state held a business conference last week that connected more than 300 minority business owners with 40 state and federal-agencies.

The program is part of Gov. Ted Strickland's Turn-Around Ohio plan to promote job creation and retention, said James Manuel, deputy director for the Division of Minority Business Affairs within the state's development department.

Part of the state's plan, Manuel said, is to rebuild the urban core where many minority-owned business are located. Studies show that such businesses tend to hire a bigger percentage of minority employees, he said.

"Last year, \$600 million in government contract were awarded to Ohio businesses," Manuel said, "so it's important that more minority businesses are able to get an increased exposure to government and private-sector contacts."

That access to resources, which can include free counseling and training, is key to any company's growth, said Karen Shauri-Harsch, associate director of the state development office's Small Business Development Centers of Ohio.

The state's plan "is a great opportunity to reach more minority businesses and entrepreneurs, to let them know that they're not out there by themselves," she said. "That there are people out there to help guide them to make decisions that will be good for their bottom lines."

#### Resources

The U.S. Small Business Administration, Urban League and the Ohio Department of Development's Small Business Development Seminars are held once a month from 9 a.m. to noon at the Columbus Urban League, 788 Mount Vernon Ave. The dates for the rest of the year are: April 19, May 18, June 21, July 19, Aug. 16, Sept. 20, Oct. 18 and Nov. 15.

\* More information can be found at [www.entrepreneurohio.org](http://www.entrepreneurohio.org).

\* More information on the Columbus Chamber's Diversity Bridge program can be found at [www.columbus.org](http://www.columbus.org).