

National League of Cities: Providing Support Services to Strengthen Your Small Businesses

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by Karen Vasquez, Christiana McFarland and Katie Seeger

This is the second article in a series focusing on entrepreneurship and small business development. This part focuses on small business support services and highlights the work of Arlington, Va.

Small businesses are the lifeblood of communities across the United States. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), small businesses typically are the saviors of the country's economy; in the face of economic downturn, the vitality and growth of small businesses play an important part in the ability of the economy to recover.

However, small businesses face a host of barriers to success, and many fail within the first year. These barriers may include: not knowing where to find information and resources; poor management; and lack of marketing and business plans. There are many ways that local governments can intervene to address these practical needs of small businesses.

Local government support services for small businesses can include one-stop business centers, small business development centers, entrepreneurship training, business start-up fairs, group marketing system and business incubators.

This month, as part of NLC's new program development efforts on Finance and Economic Development, NLC staff visited Arlington, Va., to learn more about its economic development program. Arlington has a host of successful and diverse strategies to support development; it has been honored for its economic leadership, planning and vision by National Science Foundation, American Planning Association, National Association of Industrial and Office Properties, National Association of Counties, Environmental Protection Agency and more. Its small business program is particularly innovative.

Arlington, a large suburb in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, has recognized the importance of the small business community, and has responded with a wealth of services, events and other programs to assist small businesses. There are more than 8,000 small businesses in Arlington, and 82 percent of all businesses have less than 20 paid employees on staff. To better serve the existing small business community and to help new entrepreneurs, in 2001, Arlington Economic Development (AED) created BizLaunch, Arlington's Small Business Assistance Network, to provide research assistance, business advice, loan information and more.

"As Arlington continues to change and grow, it becomes imperative that we offer services and resources to help our small business community expand and grow also," says BizLaunch manager Tara Miles. "The resources available through BizLaunch do that - and we're excited to see more and more of Arlington's entrepreneurs taking advantage of these types of services."

BizLaunch partners with a wide variety of small business organizations and industry and business experts to provide information and workshops on writing business and marketing plans, obtaining financing and navigating the world of business taxes, permitting and licensing.

The BizLaunch center offers information, one-on-one business counseling, and research opportunities, all free of charge and in both English and Spanish. Through an ongoing partnership with the Greater Washington Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (GWHCC), the Spanish-language services - including workshops - are designed specifically to address topics pertinent to Arlington's Hispanic entrepreneurs and small business people.

The program provides a variety of products including its "Business in a Box," a customized kit of information for new entrepreneurs. The kit provides all the information a business needs in order to start a business in Arlington.

BizLaunch also offers services specific to the needs of nonprofit organizations through Arlington's Nonprofit Assistance Network. It is comprised of organizations and individuals who are committed to assisting those nonprofits whose mission is to provide direct assistance to Arlington citizens.

According to Arlington Economic Development Director Terry Holzheimer, the locality has made the growth of its small business sector a priority. "Arlington has always benefited from a strong, educated, and highly skilled work force. In addition, we have more federal contractors than in any other jurisdiction outside the District. We believe that these two factors have helped Arlington build a strong small business community and that entrepreneurs see ample opportunities for growth in Arlington."

Karen Vasquez is the public relations manager for Arlington Economic Development. For more information about BizLaunch and other services AED offers for small businesses, contact Tara Miles, manager, Business Development at (703) 228-0853 or tmiles@arlingtonvirginiausa.com. For more information about NLC's Finance and Economic Development Program or to tell us about your city's programs, contact Christiana McFarland, program director, at mcfarland@nlc.org or Katie Seeger, program associate, at seeger@nlc.org.