

Center for Business Planning and Development

Partnership among the Fairfax County Department of Family Services, the Business Development Assistance Group, and the Northern Virginia Workforce Investment Board

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Focus: The Fairfax County Department of Family Services (DFS) is the contracted service provider for the Workforce Investment Act program throughout Northern Virginia, and operates three of the five one-stop employment centers in the region. As the operator, DFS acts as a “host” and provides the space for the center, including rent and associated costs, for the centers and the co-located partners which deliver on-site employment and training services. One of the co-located service delivery partners in the Falls Church one-stop center is the Business Development Assistance Group, Inc. (BDAG), a community-based non-profit which specializes in assisting people in starting or expanding a small business. BDAG places a special focus on serving new immigrants and language minorities, who often use entrepreneurship as their first entry into American economic life. In fulfillment of this mission, and in response to the widely diverse community in Falls Church and the surrounding areas, BDAG offers all counseling services and information materials in English, Spanish, Korean, and Vietnamese.

The Center for Business Planning and Development provides business startup, retention, and expansion services to emerging entrepreneurs and existing small businesses. In 2008 they helped create 25 businesses. The Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) provides scheduled training classes on their campuses. The US SBA offers SCORE and other services that the center or clients access; clients are also referred to Small Business Development Centers as needed.

Geographic Area Served: The workforce area includes one-stop employment centers in Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William Counties; only the Falls Church SkillSource (one-stop) Center has a co-located small business development center. The Falls Church Center also operates a Job Corner, a program for youth ages 14-21.

<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dfs/webdocs/publicassistance/jobcorner.htm>

Participant Age Level: The one-stop and the Center for Business Planning and Development work with adults of all ages. BDAG clients must be of age to be employed and make contracts.

Funding Sources: The center was started with a Model One-Stop Center grant from the US Department of Labor to the Northern Virginia Workforce Investment Board in 2001; it is currently supported through cash and in-kind funding from the Fairfax County Department of Family Services and the Business Development Assistance Group, as well as special events, which are funded through business registration fees and sponsorships. Local government (non-WIA) funding from Fairfax County DFS is combined with the Business Development Assistance Group's resources, which comes from a variety of grants. The partners operate under a Memorandum of Understanding with a related cost-sharing agreement. Project GATE began implementation in December 2008, and has a control group and a performance improvement group in order to study results of interventions provided.

Key Services Abstract: As individuals are in the one-stop Career Center and mention to staff members that they desire to begin a business or as they exhaust their job search and determine that they must develop their opportunity for self sufficiency they are referred to the Center for Business Planning and Development. CBPD business counselors start with a short 1 page self assessment to determine if they are ready to begin the planning process. Next, the client receives intensive one-on-one counseling, technical assistance, or marketing plan assistance, business plan assistance, and business training as needed. CBPD works with the clients to assist them with networking and with capital for start up or expansion as needed.

If a client is not ready to start a business, or decides that he or she prefers to find a job, they will be referred to the one-stop center for employment assistance. The co-location of the employment and entrepreneurship service components are critical to the successful integration of workforce and economic development.

The primary partners are the Fairfax County Department of Family Services, the Business Development Assistance Group, and the Northern Virginia Workforce Investment Board. The center works with other organizations as needed, including the Northern Virginia Community College system, Service Source (a community-based non-profit to serve people with disabilities), the Small Business Administration, the Virginia Department of Business Assistance, and the Virginia Employment Commission. The Model One-Stop Grant in 2001 from the US Department of Labor jump-started the program, but it has been sustained through extremely committed leadership within the Fairfax County Department of Family Services, and the Business Development Assistance Group.

Summary of Key Benefits and Results: The Business Planning and Development Center served approximately 220 individuals per quarter of 2008, for a total of nearly 900 clients during that year. Of the clients served, 45% were Hispanic 15% were Asian, 15% were Black, 10% were white and 15% were other ethnic origins.

The BDAG helped 42 businesses last year. 25 (59%) were new business starts, 4 (10%) were businesses that were turned around and salvaged from closing, and 13 (31%) were business expansions. These efforts created 48 jobs. The types of businesses served ranged from Adult Home Care, Construction, Cleaning Services, Child Care, Retail Operations, and the largest group (32%) were not easily classified as they were so diverse.

The common performance standards used by the US DOL/ETA do not apply to the The Center for Business Planning and Development program, as WIA funds are not used. They evaluate their services based upon serving the clients who come to them and based upon how well the clients needs are met. The staff at BDAG desires to have a value for each job saved or created by a business development initiative established in order to indicate how successful the work is in the economy. (A formula needs to be developed that can be used universally for the value of a job created; it could include tax base contributions, the labor and wages the business provides, the lack of Health and Human Services being accessed, and the contribution to the community such as rental or home ownership.)

Lessons Learned: A small group of committed partners can decide that helping aspiring entrepreneurs is critical, and then find shared resources to support the idea. The partners determined that if they “Build it, and they will come”. There must be a true political partnership between various agencies serving clients if they want to help families become self-sufficient. Each partner does what they do best and contributes to the whole initiative. If there is a government and non-profit in partnership, they must value the contributions each can bring to the partnership and work to enhance opportunities for clients through the strengths of each organization.

One-stop centers and business development centers must be well connected to the community they are going to serve. Co-location of service providers is one key to serving clients effectively. It helps to reduce the “turf wars” that can develop by not knowing what each partner is contributing on a continuing basis. There must be a true partnership between the one-stop center staff, leading training partners, and the business development consultants if the clients are going to be effectively served.

Networking events are hard to make effective in a diverse cultural community as people of one nationality are often more comfortable with friends from their culture and do not willingly network. Some concept such as “speed networking” needs to be used to ensure that people connect with others who can help with their business expansion. (Language is often a barrier also)

There is a great need for one-on-one assistance (hand holding) for helping new business owners with business license applications, tax identification numbers, and business registrations as people are unfamiliar with the processes, the forms and the computer (in some cases). BDAG staff attempt to meet this nurturing role. The largest barrier faced by prospective entrepreneurs is the lack of available startup capital and no effective source has been secured.

There is a need for a Business Planning and Development Center in the Ft. Belvoir area of Northern Virginia to focus on assisting veterans who are leaving service to advance their careers as entrepreneurs while they have the military clearances and contacts essential to do government contracting.

Funding is a key to the sustainability of any workforce development program. The programs for clients must be advanced (built) first and then funding secured to provide the programming. Then there needs to be champions to help keep the program in place through budgets of various organizations.

When asked what enhancements are needed or desired the staff at the Northern Virginia Workforce site indicated that what has provided them the most opportunities for aspiring entrepreneurs and they are listed below:

Intensive business counseling assistance in multiple languages

Referrals to and from the one-stop employment center (also, referrals to on-site support services as needed)

Networking opportunities

Facility use for aspiring entrepreneurs (conference room, computer lab, resource library)

Business Startup marketing kit

When asked about what was needed as enhancements to the program in order to optimize the services they offer, they replied as listed below:

A consolidated calendar on a website of partner services/training events, etc. would help all who counsel clients to be able to help clients locate the training or services they need.

A matrix of specific services offered by partner organizations is needed to define concepts such as technical assistance, so that clients and counselors alike can have a clear understanding of what is available from a specific service provider.

There is need for a resource pool of funds that can be used with individuals with a great business concept, a good business plan, and an opportunity to implement effectively but whose credit rating is not very good.