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How Can the Unemployed Become Employers?

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The US Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, just announced the award of a grant for \$99,880 to the Consortium for Entrepreneurship Education for “Integrating Entrepreneurship into the Workforce Investment System”, effective July 2008. The project will address strategies for local Workforce Investment Act (WIA) systems to deal with the problem of preparing those individuals who wish to become entrepreneurs while obtaining assistance within the existing system.

According to Dr. Cathy Ashmore, executive director of the Consortium, “In this time of so many displacing events for American workers, it is critical to focus federal, state, and local services for the unemployed on all career options available to them for economic empowerment.”

Starting your own small business is attractive to many people who are involved in a displacing event...be it losing your job, emerging from incarceration, becoming a widow or divorcee, being an immigrant, or any other type of event that forces one to find a new path. To be successful in a new business, large or small, it is important to have the entrepreneurial skills to create and manage it successfully. It is believed that a large segment of the Americans supported through WIA initiatives would be well served to be able to access training and coaching for a new business startup, especially in communities where jobs are scarce.

The heritage of the DOL/ETA is to focus on training and assistance to prepare individuals to work for existing employers. One of the current Guiding Principles of the DOL/ETA is to turn individuals into career entrepreneurs by equipping them with the information they need to develop the knowledge, skills and abilities sought after in the new economy. By law (e.g., in the Workforce Investment Act), entrepreneurial training is specifically cited as an allowable training activity. However, also by law, the Workforce Investment System establishes performance indicators and benchmarks to measure the results of the investment of funds for training. These common measures are sometimes barriers to the needs of developing entrepreneurs. As a result the personnel implementing the system have no simple way to encourage creating new business opportunities in communities where jobs are scarce or in cases where the client prefers to create their own business.

Therefore the work of this project will focus on enhancing the process for empowering and coaching those who desire to become entrepreneurs as they enter the Workforce Investment System.

According to project director, Horace Robertson, “The Consortium will be providing a central platform to share models that WIA providers are already using to help create entrepreneurs. This will include sharing all of the diverse methods to access training and coaching already provided by One-Stop Centers, SBDCs, adult education programs in the colleges, Minority Business Development Centers, and all of the many diverse training and mentoring systems available nationwide.”

The Consortium has expertise to provide this platform because for the past 26+ years it has been doing exactly that! Its annual conference brings hundreds of entrepreneurship education providers together each year. Through this gathering they share their expertise, network, and expand the field. Some successes include the initiation of congressionally-recognized National Entrepreneurship Week, establishing National Content Standards and Practices, and advancing the inclusion of entrepreneurial concepts into all educational disciplines nationwide. For information about the conference and how to attend go to www.entre-ed.org/network.forum.htm

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