

# 'A gutsy move'

Helping small businesses with startup is UAH center's focus



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**SBDC Procurement Assistant Holley DeGroat, left, Director/Senior Consultant Foster Perry and Procurement Specialist Mary Jane Fleming counseled 372 potential new small business owners in 2011.**

By Kimberly Ballard

**T**he Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at the University of Alabama in Huntsville campus and its specialty program, the Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC), are helping to forge dreams into reality for startups in North Alabama.

The center counseled 372 potential new small business owners in 2011. With over 600 active companies in its database, the organization held 822 business-counseling sessions and trained 579 attendees in 28 workshops held throughout seven counties in North Alabama. According to new SBDC Director Foster Perry, there is plenty of need for its small business development services and no shortage of collaboration among city and state resources to increase outreach in 2012-13. In fact, the young SBDC program has

gained traction over the past four years.

"With tough competition for jobs, many people are foregoing their careers to pursue lifelong dreams of owning their own business. They are venturing into their own consulting firms and bidding on government contracts; opening restaurants and retail stores; developing software; starting nonprofit organizations; and getting involved in biomedical research, energy production, and telecommunications," Perry says. "Young people, frustrated with the job market, are taking their ideas and developing them on their own where they won't feel constrained by large corporations. It is a gutsy move to start your own business, no matter how old or experienced you are."

Partially funded through a cooperative agreement with the Small Business Administration (SBA), UAH's center is one of over 300 small business centers across the country

and a member of the Alabama Small Business Development Center in Tuscaloosa. The UAH center collaborates with many entities throughout the area to help small business owners and start-ups get off on the right track. The SBDC holds a couple of events every month and the Chamber of Commerce of Huntsville/Madison County helps spread the word to the appropriate contacts using its large database. The Chamber also provides venues and communication resources to help the SBDC coordinate business-related events and workshops.

UAH and Cummings Research Park are primed for a college student with an innovative invention or entrepreneurs with clever ideas. "It's the advantage of being a part of a university that, when someone comes to the SBDC and says, 'I have an idea' or 'I have invented something,' we have graduate students who help them test their ideas, do the research and perform market opportunity analyses," says Perry. Working with UAH's Office of Technology & Commercialization, the SBDC helps inventors with intellectual property-related matters involving patents; marketing and communication; and it guides them to research and development funding sources.

The center also provides workshops and seminars for writing a business and marketing plan. It counsels people on what type of business they need — a proprietorship, a partnership, or an LLC; and it helps them determine whether they qualify as a small disadvantaged business. The center guides people to resources for how to set up those entities, and how to build a compliant accounting structure for both tax purposes and for doing business with the government; and it offers advice on how to staff up and hire quality employees. In addition, the center leads prospects to financial funding through local banks, and helps them qualify for Small Business Administration (SBA) loans. "We refer them to Biztech if it is technology-related, where they have access to private funding," Perry says. Huntsville's technology incubator, BizTech provides financial resources through its statewide Angel Network consortium for technology.

Few college campuses have the kind of direct access to technological analysis, testing, research, and development as CRP, with its dozens of Fortune 500 companies and hundreds of successful business leaders, all ready to empower the next small business to success. Perry, who is also adjunct lecturer at UAH teaching International Management and Operations and the Principles of Management, believes Huntsville has a unique urbanity that nurtures creative business ideas, academic ingenuity and the entrepreneurial spirit.

"There is a culture in Huntsville that is unique to most cities. It is extraordinary really how people in this community are willing to help others find success in business, without requiring credit for it, or expecting any success of their own from it."

### CONTRACTOR SPEED DATING

The SBDC has longstanding relationships with government contractors in the area. When older workers take an early retirement to pursue their own consulting firms bidding on government business; or when retired military personnel use their pensions to pursue a familiar technology where they feel they can fill a need, market demand tends to divvy up the business proportionally.

An SBDC premier program known as Bid Match is what Mary Jane Fleming, SBDC counselor and procurement specialist with PTAC, calls "speed dating" in the government contracting industry. PTAC is the government-contracting arm of the SBDC. "Bid Match is our controlled networking matchmaker. We collaborate with representatives from large prime contractors like Marshall Space Flight Center (MSFC), NASA, Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Teledyne Brown Engineering to connect them with subcontractors who are the best fit for their needs," Fleming says. "At the same time, we work with over a hundred small businesses to help them recognize their limitations so they do not waste time bidding on jobs they will never get, while helping them focus on their unique capabilities so they can market themselves and network with the right people to get contracts." Bid Match is held in October at the Jack-

son Center and is scheduled according to the contractors' areas of expertise. Small business subcontractors meet in 15-minute increments with representatives from the prime contractor companies.

It is a fancy dance. Every small business wants to meet a representative from NASA and spend time doing its best to convince the Boeing Co. that the contractor has the right stuff for the job. "We determine a company's potential for success in government contracting based on the same criteria the SBA uses," Fleming says. "Management, financial capability, personnel, facilities, staffing and equipment prevail. How you set up your business and having a compliant bookkeeping system is a big part of that criteria. You can be a one-man show and still have the right stuff."

PTAC conducts pre-qualification screenings of all small business contractors. Fleming's 10 years of expertise in small business and six years in procurement helps her narrow qualifications and target the right matches. Trained by UAH and the SBA, Fleming has racked up many professional development hours studying different SBA programs that affect government contractors here in North Alabama.

"In addition to technical capabilities, there are socioeconomic factors as well," says Fleming. "Whether they are an 8A certified disadvantaged business or veteran-owned is sometimes significant." The SBA's small disadvantaged business program is designed to level the playing field for small minority and women-owned companies who want to do business with the government.

"If you live in the world of government contracting, you get immersed in it," says Perry who spent years in the defense industry living throughout the U.S., overseas, and Latin America. "Getting those SBA designations and qualifying for SBA loans can change the trajectory for a small business. They can go on to joint ventures and start other businesses, as well."

### FREE AND AFFORDABLE

Most SBDC services are free or offered at a nominal cost. The quality of the speakers and trainers, however, is top notch. "In our government compliant

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accounting workshops for instance, we use CPAs and accounting professionals who have worked for government contractors, and we use prime contractor protégés for speaking engagements and panel discussions," says Perry. "People who have been there like Mark Spencer, founder of Digium; Tim Pickens, chief propulsion engineer at Dynetics; and Jamie Green, purchasing manager at TBE."

Perry has been the center's director only since May 2012, but he feels the SBDC is growing, and he wants to accelerate that growth. "This year has been challenging due to losing our associate director to cancer," he says. "Our administrative assistant left because her husband got a great job opportunity out of state. Currently we have two spectacular counselors, but we need more." His plans to increase the budget will lead to adding counselors that are more specialized. "The Women's Business Center of North Alabama (WBCNA) is expert at bringing programs and consulting services to anyone who needs them," Perry says. "They also do an excellent job at acquiring corporate sponsorships, and we are taking a page from their playbook in this area."

In the long term, he intends to use his position on the Board of Interstate Marketing Associates and connections with the National Defense Industrial Association to push the SBDC's agenda. He will continue building his relationships with local organizations and overlapping business networking opportunities to fuel well coordinated but informal efforts at growing the SBDC program.

Perry is also implementing a broader outreach to the seven-county area that includes a number of road shows. He's been invited to speak to the Limestone Chamber of Commerce at a Lunch & Learn event about how to write a successful business plan, and he will visit the Chamber in Scottsboro as well.

"There is plenty of need out there," he says. "Collaboration and competition just make more resources available to more people. Together, we all do a lot of good work." ■

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