



Urban League helps small businesses get started

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A divorced mother of two wonders how to market her quilting skills. A fudge-maker needs a kitchen so he can sell candy and supplement his disability check. A barber shop requests a loan to cover plumbing repairs.

Those are just a few calls made to the Urban League of Champaign County in recent months seeking help for small business enterprises.

To help them get started, the Urban League and other community partners plan to open a business development center for minority-owned and small businesses in Champaign.

Called the Urban Business Station, it could be located in the former Lone Star Lodge building at 208 N. First St., C, now owned by the city of Champaign.

The Urban League proposes buying the building for \$1, moving its offices there from its current headquarters at Springfield Avenue and Neil Street and opening a small-business incubator in September. City officials are evaluating that proposal and five others submitted in February for the now-vacant Lone Star property.

If the proposal fails, the Urban League will open the center in its current headquarters at Springfield Avenue and Neil Street for the time being, said Sandra Jones, interim president and CEO.

As proposed, the business development center would have computers, mailboxes, copy machines and other services at reasonable fees for small or home-based businesses. It would also offer educational, consulting and training opportunities, according to the Urban League's proposal.

A minority contracting center would help contractors qualify for state jobs through the UI and partner on projects too big to tackle alone.

The lodge's kitchen would be an incubator for a bakery or catering start-up, or rented out to churches or nonprofit groups that need a public health-certified kitchen for a fundraiser.

Another room could be used for a coffee shop or retail startup, perhaps selling products developed by other incubator businesses, the proposal says. Jones said the intent is not to duplicate services provided by the Chamber of Commerce or incubators at the University of Illinois Research Park.

Rather, it's partnering with those organizations and others to provide basic services for "the smallest, neediest and least informed of our potential workforce business creators," the proposal says.

Many of those people, of all races, are comfortable working with the Urban League but either don't know about or are too intimidated to use the services of the chamber, Parkland College or the UI, Jones said.

"The League has a history and reputation of accepting all comers and finding no question too silly or

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no need too small," the proposal says. "While this might be hard for portions of our community to understand, there is still a significant mistrust among our less affluent constituents and their access to services and resources others take for granted." As for financing, the center would be able to tap into grant opportunities through the Urban League and its national affiliation, Jones said, and pursue loans and other funding available to nonprofits for business development. Busey and Hickory Point banks are also backing the idea.

The business development center would also assume control of an existing nonprofit corporation that provides "micro loans" to new businesses and has about \$48,000 available now, she said.

"They've agreed to turn that pool of money over to us so that we've got a starting place for loans," Jones said.

The Urban League has requested grants and donations to equip the building with computers and wireless technology. Mike Hosier, owner of Champaign Telephone, has agreed to provide a telephone system, and Parkland College has promised ongoing technology support.

The Chamber will share its resources, possibly making its Service Corps of Retired Executives counselors available at the center a couple of days a week.

The UI's Academy for Entrepreneurship would offer courses and share resources. Jack Dempsey, executive director of facilities and services at the UI, pledged to work with minority contractors certified through the center to help meet hiring goals.

"We would benefit greatly from it," Dempsey said.

Chamber President and CEO Laura Weis, who wrote a letter of support, said Lone Star Lodge is the ideal spot for the center because of its location, access to buses, and potential partnerships with Land of Lincoln legal services next door.

But she said the physical location isn't as crucial as getting potential business owners connected to the right services so they don't "fall through the cracks." "If this plan falls through, I think there are probably a lot of opportunities and ways for us to approach this by getting everybody at the table," Weis said.

The size of the operation is "still evolving," Jones said. A working group of business, city and educational leaders has met for two years but still can't pinpoint the exact number of minority businesses in the county, Jones said.

"It honestly is a work in progress, and it's clearly a need," she said.

The new owners of the Rose & Taylor barber shop and beauty salon at 124 N. First St. recently approached the Urban League for a loan to pay for unexpected plumbing problems. William and Carla Jones hope to do some renovations and someday expand, but the plumbing connects to an old city pipeline that has deteriorated over the years, leading to a "stench" in the barber shop, Williams Jones said.

Installing new plumbing would cost \$5,000 to \$10,000, he said. The couple already had to pay to update an electrical system that didn't meet city code. Sandra Jones told them to "hold on" until the business center can get up and running.

William Jones is grateful for the Urban League's help and thinks the new center is "definitely needed." He and his wife have taken business courses and benefited from mentors, he said, but not everyone has that opportunity. At the center, entrepreneurs could learn "how to start a business, put together a successful business plan and have teachers and mentors who can guide you through the process." Sometimes just a little help can keep a family together, as with the divorced mom looking for ways to support her two children, Sandra Jones said.

Other potential clients include a TIMES Center resident on medical disability who wants to sell fudge at farmers markets for extra income but needs a certified commercial kitchen and a place to store

ingredients.

"If he could supplement his income, he could actually afford an apartment and live independently," she said.

Source: MCT

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