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Visioneering Wichita Launches Minority Business Initiative

At a news conference today, Visioneering Wichita's Entrepreneur and Small Business Strategic Alliance launched a new program to help regional minority businesses succeed. Visioneering Wichita and the Alliance announced the "Minority Business Initiative" that will link minority-owned businesses with ongoing mentoring and education.

The goal is to have a 90 percent success rate for the participating minority-owned businesses after five years. The initiative is patterned after the John C. Ford Program in Dallas that had a 90 percent success rate for businesses after five years.

All minority businesses interested are encouraged to attend one of two orientations to be held on July 21st from 8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. and July 24th from 6:00 p.m. – 10:00 p.m. At the orientations, more information on the criteria and program will be provided and questions on the process answered.

"I encourage every member of our many minority communities who has dreamed of beginning a business or taking their existing business to a new level to look into this great program that our Visioneering volunteers have created," said Mayor Carl Brewer.

The program idea began after another Visioneering Wichita alliance conducted a survey.

"Visioneering Wichita opened the door to this dream when the Racial Diversity, Opportunity and Harmony Alliance conducted the first-ever survey on perceptions on racial issues," said Brian Black, a leadership team member of the Racial Diversity, Opportunity and Harmony Alliance, and president and CEO of Urban League of Kansas and "Those results provided the impetus for the Entrepreneur and Small Business Alliance to design and implement this program."

The Visioneering Wichita survey results showed that the minority community felt at a disadvantage when it comes to starting a new business, among other issues.

"Our Entrepreneur and Small Business Alliance wanted to do something specific to address that issue and focused on helping minority business owners grow here," said Abel Perez, Chairman of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and member of the Entrepreneur and Small Business Alliance.

Dr. John Beehler, co-chair of the Alliance and dean of the W. Frank Barton School of Business at Wichita State University, was on the board of the John C. Ford Program in Dallas and saw first-hand the program's success. "We know that starting and growing a business is difficult, and a business owner needs the right mix of knowledge and help. This program brings those two elements together in a structured way."

The Alliance hopes to choose from 16 to 24 businesses for the first class, with the program being offered twice a year.

The program consists of three primary parts:

First, the selection committee will choose the minority-owned businesses for the first class. All those interested are encouraged to call Diane Longfellow, Visioneering Wichita, at (316) 268-1141 to RSVP for one of the two orientations. Criteria for selection include the business owner must be a member of a minority community, a resident of the Wichita MSA and have a desire to start a new business or expand an existing one.

Second, that group of business owners will meet in structured classes that will use the First Step FastTrac® program. Developed through the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the program will address topics such as networking, funding a business, feasibility plans and pricing.

Third, the business owners will meet on an ongoing basis with volunteer mentors and coaches who have expertise in business. The team of mentors will be tailored for each business owners' needs and may change throughout the process as the business grows.

"This is a great opportunity for any minority business owner that wants to open the door to what your business can become," Perez said. "You can learn the fundamentals of business and start from the ground floor – or grow your existing business."

The first class of businesses will begin meeting in September. The program has been a cooperative, volunteer effort by numerous organizations working through Visioneering Wichita. Those organizations will market the program to their members and constituents.

"This Alliance has put in an amazing number of volunteer hours to bring this program to life," said Suzie Ahlstrand, vice president of community advancement for the Wichita Metro Chamber of Commerce. "Our alliance and community volunteers are committed to making these minority-owned businesses successful."

In addition, the Minority Business Initiative is recruiting volunteer mentors with expertise in business. Call Diane Longfellow, Visioneering Wichita, at (316) 268-1141 for more information about volunteering.