

IN THE NEWSThe logo for 'concentrate' features the word in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font. A small white dot is positioned above the letter 'o'. The text is centered within a solid green rectangular background.

December 21, 2022 | by BROOKE MARSHALL

New Washtenaw County program offers \$5,000 grants, business growth programs for microbusinesses

In January, a new Washtenaw County program will allow microbusiness owners to apply for a \$5,000 grant and a spot in one of five business growth programs.

The Small Business Growth Activator (SBGA) program is a partnership between the Washtenaw County Office of Community and Economic Development (OCED) and five local business support organizations: Proxie, the Association of Businesses of Color (ABC), Ann Arbor SPARK, Growing Hope, and the Michigan Small Business Development Center (SBDC). Funding for the SBGA comes from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

The SBGA is geared specifically toward microbusinesses — businesses with five or fewer employees — whose owners' household income is less than 80% of the Washtenaw County median. The income threshold ranges from \$62,600 to \$110,900 depending on the business owner's household size. The program can accept 80-100 participants.

Microbusinesses were especially hard hit during the COVID-19 pandemic, and tended to slip through the cracks of nationwide relief programs such as the Paycheck Protection Program or the Economic Injury Disaster Loan.

"The [SBGA] is designed to be a stepping stone for those that were missed," says Cheranissa Roach, economic opportunity manager for the OCED.

Two of the partner organizations — Proxie and the ABC — emerged in response to the pandemic. Proxie, a technical assistance firm, began offering training and resources to Black women-owned and diverse businesses in April 2020. The organization will lead the Digital Pivot Program, which teaches entrepreneurs how to grow their businesses through e-commerce.

"Folks who may have a business but are not online get the opportunity to be shepherded into the online space," Roach explains. "[They're] not left holding the bag and wondering what's going on, but actually get to be walked through it by somebody who's done it before."

The ABC formed in the summer of 2020 to connect Washtenaw County-area businesses of color to funding opportunities during the pandemic. ABC members will lead one-on-one meetings paired with a "mastermind cohort"

called Mind Your Business. Roach, smiling, describes a mastermind cohort as “a brainstorm on steroids.” As the cohort bounces ideas off of each other, an experienced mentor guides the discussion and offers advice.

Other partner organizations draw upon years of experience. Since 2003, Ypsilanti-based Growing Hope has worked toward fostering an equitable, sustainable, and local food system. Its program, Food Businesses and the Collaborative Kitchen, presents strategies for growing food-based businesses in shared spaces.

Ann Arbor SPARK has offered services and guidance to tech startups since 2006, but its SBGA program, Advance Your Business, will offer one-on-one coaching regardless of whether the business is STEM-oriented. Roach says that's a good thing.

“This is going to allow [SPARK] to work with folks that may not come into them every day,” she says.

Finally, the Michigan SBDC — which provides consulting, training, and market research from its 10 offices across the state — will head a course called Uplift Michigan. This three-part program consists of online and in-person classes, as well as a peer-support session led by a business coach.

“That part is so critical because as an entrepreneur, you're often alone with your ideas,” Roach says.

If the SBGA program is successful, Roach says, it could have community-wide implications — starting, of course, with the microbusinesses themselves.

“Their sales will go up. Their business will be stabilized. And while COVID is still out there and still doing damage, they will at least have the knowledge and the support to know how to take steps forward,” she says.

Rippling outward, the business owners may be able to take on new hires, reducing unemployment and helping people find jobs.

“It's also a reflection to show that Washtenaw County as a whole is a place that entrepreneurs can be supported and can grow their businesses,” Roach says.

Brooke Marshall is a freelance writer and recent transplant to Belleville. She first visited Ann Arbor on a cross-country bicycle tour; you can read that story (and more!) in her first book, “Lucky.”