



Shop-An-Cart owner Shawndela Isom.

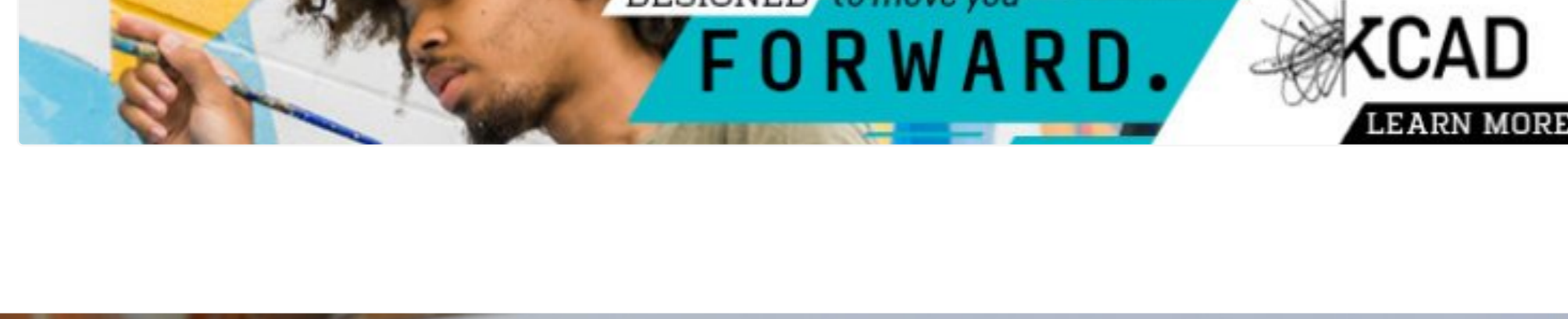
Doug Coombe

Washtenaw County "microbusinesses" get mentoring, funding through Small Business Growth Activator

SARAH RIGG | WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2023

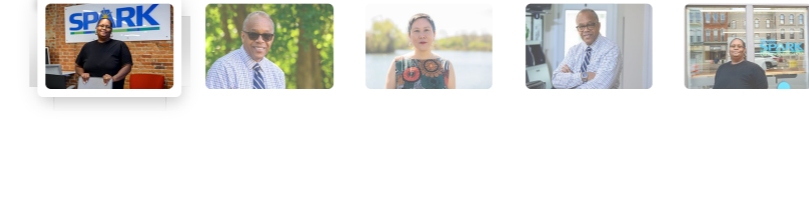
The program, a collaboration between several county organizations, targets microbusinesses that have five or fewer employees and meet a certain income threshold.

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, Duane Pittman, CEO of Ann Arbor-based [Vector Electric, Inc.](#), saw an opportunity to offer something other businesses weren't providing: advice on managing a federal government contract once you've won the bid.

A self-employed engineer since the mid-'70s, Pittman worked as an electrical contractor for the federal government up until COVID-19 hit. During the pandemic, he had time to reflect on his business plan and how to maximize his expertise now that, as he says, "it's easier to get into government contracting than it used to be."

He notes that lots of companies have sprung up to help small businesses learn how to win those contracts, but some of those newer businesses might not have the experience it takes to make the project succeed.



Vector Electric, Inc. CEO Duane Pittman.

"What we're doing is helping companies once they get the award for the contract," Pittman says. "How do you manage the project, the paperwork, the invoicing? What happens if you run into a problem?"

Pittman is one of dozens of small local business owners who have been upping their games thanks to the [Small Business Growth Activator \(SBGA\)](#) program. The program was announced earlier this year as 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 \(SBDC\)](#).

Microbusinesses sometimes overlooked

Funding for the SBGA came from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The program targets microbusinesses that have five or fewer employees and meet a certain income threshold. It could accommodate up to 100 participants across all five partner organizations.

Cheranna Williams, OCED's economic opportunity manager, says microbusinesses of this type were often "missed" by pandemic-era programs like the Paycheck Protection Program or the Economic Injury Disaster Loan. SBGA participants receive a \$5,000 grant, mentoring from one of the five partner organizations, and technical support.

Pittman went through SPARK's program, Accelerate Your Business, while founders of food-based businesses took part in Growing Hope's Food Businesses and the Collaborative Kitchen program. Proxie's program focused on helping small businesses build out e-commerce offerings, while the SBDC offered the Uplift Michigan program. ABC's curriculum was called Mind Your Business and focused on getting into the right mindset.

Williams says that because the program was cohort-based, business owners could pick the session that was the best fit for them, not only in topic but in the hours the program was offered online versus in-person.



Kristine Nash-Wong, SPARK East's director of entrepreneurial services.

Participants who made it through the program were also eligible for an additional \$2,500 for services like marketing or financial planning.

Kristine Nash-Wong, director of entrepreneurial services at SPARK East, says financial planning help was the top request from the microbusinesses. The second most requested topic was establishing or growing an online presence.

"There are some incredible companies that have been operating in Washtenaw County for 10 or 20 years without an online presence," she says.

Reflecting on the experience

Pittman says his small but established business didn't need some of the business services other applicants did. He says Accelerate Your Business helped him get certificates and training he needed. However, he says the biggest benefit of the program was helping him analyze his vision for his consulting company, go deeper, and "itemize in granular detail."

Through the same program, [Ypsilantique](#) vintage store owner Amanda Gaytan learned to improve the quality of her social media branding and use of social media analytic tools. She says one lesson about branding was "learning how to present an entity rather than a person" on social media for Ypsilantique.

Linette Lao is the president of ABC and founder of Ypsilanti-based brand development studio [Invisible Engines](#). She says that as ABC members wrote their application to be a partner in the SBGA, they realized they were seeing "a specific need to work on mindset."

In practice, that could range from asking participants to examine their conscious and perhaps unconscious ideas about money, scarcity, or what it means to be a business owner.

Association of Businesses of Color President Linette Lao.

"Other partners were providing really strong technical assistance, but we saw that working on mindset might be the missing tool," Lao says.

Lao says participants in Mind Your Business were growing businesses whose services ranged from housecleaning to making candy to offering accounting for other small businesses. They went through an intentionally long course that spanned eight months, and received four months of individual coaching.

Ypsilanti business owner Shawndela Isom built her company Shop-An-Cart in Ypsilanti to help families with transportation challenges overcome those barriers. As a young mother, she remembers feeling stressed about toting groceries on the bus.

She says others are offering transportation services to get to and from errands or shopping, so instead, she's offering an errand or concierge service through Shop-An-Cart. It's an L3C, a "low-profit" company that blends aspects of both for-profit and nonprofit businesses. Isom calls it "a for-profit business with a nonprofit heart."

The vision is to offer low-cost services to seniors and even free services to low-income families. She hopes to become a partner with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services or a local housing agency to offset costs for the low-income users.

Shop-An-Cart owner Shawndela Isom.

Isom says it's hard to eat a good diet if you don't have transportation. She remembers giving her own kids pop-top ravioli to "fill them up quick." But she began to watch the family's diet more carefully after her daughter was diagnosed with diabetes. She's hoping to make a diet with more fresh produce available to families struggling now the way she did when she was younger.

Isom went through the Mind Your Business program and felt ABC was a "great connection."

"They really helped me, and I got so much out of it," Isom says. "It made me want to go further. I'm looking into taking some classes on business and going further with my education."

"In addition to education and technical assistance, we wanted to build a program that would create a small community, to connect these business owners so they can learn with and from each other," Lao says. "It was really beautiful to see the way these eight people in a cohort really care about each other. They formed a really strong connection and some strong relationships were made that I think will be lasting."

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All photos by [Doug Coombe](#).

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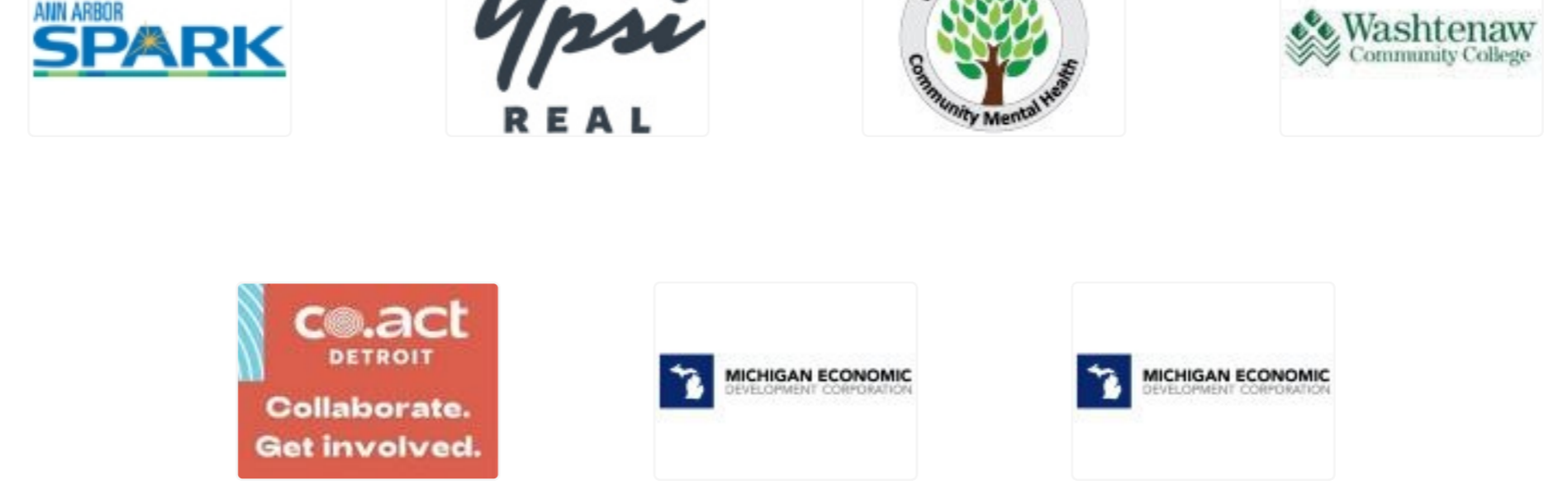
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