

## Grants help small businesses in Delta, Schoolcraft counties

By R. R. Branstrom

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ESCANABA — Small businesses in Michigan were recently awarded grants through the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC)'s Small Business Support Hub program, which has 27 branches throughout the state designed to connect business owners with resources to help them be successful. Three recipients in the Central Upper Peninsula shared details on their experiences with the Hub and its collaborating partners,

The program, approved by the Michigan Strategic Fund in June 2023, is funded by a one-time appropriation using American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars. To be eligible for support and services from the Hub, businesses must be independently-owned and operated, have less than 500 employees, and qualify as disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

The local division, the Central Upper Peninsula Small Business Support Hub (CUPSBSH), contains seven counties: Alger, Baraga, Delta, Dickinson, Marquette, Menominee, and Schoolcraft. All are defined as rural counties that inherently are considered to be disproportionately affected by the pandemic, so all businesses within them, even new start-ups, check that box.

Applications for the first direct grant cycle were accepted between Sept. 13 and Oct. 11 of 2024. In Delta County, four grants were awarded from out of ten applications; Schoolcraft saw the exact same numbers; in Menominee County, only one application was received, and that business was awarded a \$3,900 grant.

BLV26CD (Believe to Succeed), founded by Glenn Kinderman of Menominee in 2019, is a service to provide holistic wellness and life coaching. Kinderman himself is a retired, disabled Vietnam-era veteran who served 21 years in the U.S. Navy (Submarine Force) and designed his business originally with the intent to help other veterans cope with trauma and PTSD. When the pandemic hit, BLV26CD — which provides services to business responders, caregivers, police

departments, fire departments, and health care professionals, Kinderman explained.

After learning about the Hub from social media, he attended a training session at Spies Public Library in Menominee and was surprised to find that he was the only established business owner there; others present were hopeful entrepreneurs.

CUPSBSH informational events are held in each county every quarter. Resource navigators help connect business owners to various forms of assistance based on need.

*“The challenges I needed help with were finding niche, marketing strategies, and effective use of social media, especially learning to create long and short videos for YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, etc.”* Kinderman said. *“I applied for the grant to upgrade old and outdated computer equipment and software plus purchasing an advertising banner to display at veterans fairs and metaphysical and wellness fairs.”*

After submitting the grant application, he made use of a few other resources. Through Michigan Small Business Consulting Services, Kinderman had his website reviewed for advice on search engine optimization (SEO), which was done by Michigan Technological University. Further live sessions provided financial training on things like bookkeeping, breakeven analysis, sales projections and product-pricing, and they supplied free Excel templates.

Kinderman’s contacts at the Hub were Erica Huss, program manager; and Jose Laynez, small business resource navigator for Menominee and Dickinson Counties.

*“Resource navigators are here to help people get to the resources they need to achieve their business goals — if what they are needing help with is something in our wheelhouse (for example, creating a business plan, marketing, etc.), then we work directly with them to accomplish their goals,”* said Huss. *“If their business needs are something we feel would be*

*Michigan’s Small Business Development Center, Michigan Works, Accelerate UP, and several other organizations to help businesses achieve their goals and overcome barriers they may be facing.”*

In Delta County, Gladstone-based Rock Electric Service — which has served the area for 18 years — secured a Hub grant along with LeverEdge Chiropractic, Maria’s Taxes and More, and Youngs Menswear. Rock Electric’s marketing director, Michelle Turner, said she was unfamiliar with the Hub until Ilana Minor, the small business resource navigator for Alger, Delta and Schoolcraft Counties, reached out.

*“Minor stopped by with information about the program and how to get started. ... She was extremely helpful and thorough,”* Turner said.

Rock Electric, which provides engineering services and commercial and industrial equipment and recently created a new division specializing in automation, experienced “*crippling*” supply chain issues during the pandemic.

*“We re-engineered existing products to accommodate what materials were available, resulting in engineering cost increases of 45 to 50 percent,”* wrote Turner. *“The rapid transition to remote meetings and alternate communication methods compounded the challenges.”*

Though they have not yet participated in a Hub event or informational session — a requirement before receiving the grant — Turner said that they will do so before the time is up.

As for the intent of the \$5,000 of Hub funds to be awarded to Rock Electric Service: *“We are upgrading and expanding our IT system to improve our virtual meeting capability, enhance our data storage and security, and connect our field service technicians to our data server via tablets,”* Turner said.

A much smaller business that secured money from the Hub was Of Curious Nature, an operation run by Kitt Latsch of Manistique. As the founder, business, Latsch creates hand-

poured soy candles with names and scents designed to evoke feelings and memories connected to the U.P.

Of Curious Nature doesn't operate out of a storefront. The products — with scents like “*Superior State of Mind*,” “*Gitche Gumee*,” “*God's Country*,” “*The Porkies*,” and “*Camp*” — are made in Latsch's own home and sold at craft shows and a few locations, including Flowers by Jodi; Big Boy in Manistique; and the Michigan Made stores in Manistique, Harvey and Houghton. She also sells on Etsy at ofcuriousnature.etsy.com.

*“I'm just a very small business, and shipping is crazy,”* said Latsch. *“I buy a box of wax here, some candle tins there, and make those and sell them. I never could get ahead enough to buy in large enough quantities to cut some of that shipping cost — or to get a discount on prices. So that's what I was looking for.”*

There are restrictions to how a Hub grant may be used, and Latsch's goal of acquiring materials to make her products fit the bill perfectly. Funds cannot be applied to general overhead like rent and utilities, nor construction or infrastructure. Suggested uses were for specialized consulting services, licensing fees, equipment or inventory.

Once she heard that she was approved for a \$2,000 reimbursement grant, Latsch was able to make purchases that would enable her to continue her business and hopefully enjoy a greater profit margin. She bought wax, containers, a respirator and QuickBooks. Nicole Potvin with the Michigan Small Business Development Center is helping her to build a website.

Without having connected to the CUPSBSH, Latsch said, *“I may not have continued.”*

Besides the grant money itself, she explained, the Hub has helped provide guidance to craft a business plan for Of Curious Nature and register as an LLC. Latsch also spoke highly of the Lake Superior Community Partnership.

*just blown away that all this was free.”*

Both Latsch and Kinderman said that only a few people were at the training sessions they attended, and Turner also mentioned that awareness seemed to be lacking.

*“More needs to be done to ensure people are aware of the resources that are available,”* Turner said.

Applications for the second traunch of direct grants through the CUPSBSH are being accepted now through Feb. 14, 2025. Two more cycles will also open later this year, from May 30 to June 27 and from Oct. 10 to Nov. 7.

Questions about the Hub may be directed to [erica@centralupsmallbizhub.org](mailto:erica@centralupsmallbizhub.org).

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