

Voices From the Field

**A Report from the
National Women's Business Council
Town Hall Meetings**



NWBC TOWN HALL MEETINGS

Beginning in March of 2007 and continuing through June of 2008, the National Women's Business Council (NWBC) held a series of five town hall meetings with women business owners around the country. The objective of the meeting series was to hear from women business owners about their views and ideas on national-level policy issues in order to inform the Council's future recommendations to government leaders.

Each meeting brought together members of the National Women's Business Council and women business owners for a day-long dialogue about issues that are most important to women business owners today. Sessions included discussions about access to capital, affordable health care, government procurement, tax reform, and education and workforce development. These topics were chosen because of their importance to women business owners.

Hundreds of women attended the meetings, including owners of businesses both small and large and both emerging and established. Participants included women in all industries, of all experience levels, and of all income levels. Leaders of national women's business organizations, local organizations which support women business owners, and state and local policy leaders also attended the forums. The meetings were held outside of the Washington, DC area to engage women entrepreneurs who are not normally connected to the national-level policy process.

While the primary purpose of these town hall meetings was to elicit input on policy issues, an unintended outcome was providing participants with the opportunity to hear advice from successful women business owners, to brainstorm solutions to the challenges they are facing, and to learn from each other about available resources.

SUMMARY AND THEMES

Many of the issues of concern to women business owners and their enterprises are similar to the challenges all small business owners face. Almost across the board, participants expressed frustration over their ability to access capital to start and expand their businesses, the high cost of health care coverage for themselves and their employees, the inaccessibility of most government and corporate contracting opportunities, the complexity and burden of the tax structure, and the challenges of attracting, retaining, and training productive workforces.

Discussion at all of the forums reinforced the value of the resources available to assist women business owners with their business challenges, specifically the importance of entrepreneurial development programs like Women's Business Centers, which provide counseling to thousands of aspiring entrepreneurs in local communities. Conversations revealed a lack of knowledge about many of the resources that are available to women business owners, and they highlighted the need for a more organized source to which women business owners can turn to be directed to available resources. In addition, participants continually expressed a need for more opportunities to network with and learn from other women.

While many women business owner challenges can be generalized to all small businesses, there are issues that make women's business ownership unique. For example, women are more likely to be balancing business ownership with managing a family—creating a different set of resource and technical assistance needs. Another often-cited difference is that many women business owners intend to maintain their businesses as small, family-owned businesses—frequently choosing not to grow their businesses at the expense of losing time with their families. This presents issues related to accessing capital, since these business growth patterns may not be what funders are expecting to see. Also, many women business owners have demonstrated a lack of interest in sharing control of their companies in order to acquire venture capital.

Issues faced by microbusinesses, with few or no employees, are somewhat different than those faced by larger “small” businesses. The distinction between a small business and a microbusiness is especially important to women, as many women business owners tend to be sole proprietors who have no plans or desire to significantly grow their firms. Women often choose

home-based businesses for family and lifestyle reasons, and the resources these women need are different than most currently-available resources which are organized around businesses endeavoring to expand.

A striking theme across the meetings and throughout the sessions was a lack of knowledge about the resources that are available to assist women businesses owners. Participants repeatedly cited a lack of available capital and the need for technical assistance in numerous operational areas. And many echoed the need for a comprehensive resource guide to outline all of the many options and resources that are available.

While they certainly may not fill every need, there are, in fact, a range of financing options and resources specifically designed to further women's business ownership. That they are relatively unknown to much of their target audience suggests that programs such as Women's Business Centers, Small Business Development Centers, and SCORE—as well as banks and other lending institutions—may need to increase their outreach and marketing efforts to the women business owners that their programs are designed to serve.

Finally, a prevailing theme from many of the discussions was that networking and mentoring are especially important for women business owners. There was a strong desire for more seminars, webinars, web sites, video conferences, and women's organization meetings to provide women business owners with opportunities to learn from each other.

While policy considerations were the primary topic of the meetings, during the sessions, women business owners said they need better organized information and technical assistance. Women business owners need help dealing with much of the “back room stuff” so that they can focus on managing and growing their businesses.

There are a variety of federally-supported, state- and locally-supported, and private programs which offer entrepreneurial development and technical assistance programs for women business owners. And despite their apparent value, most of these programs struggle to receive adequate government funding. Inadequate government funding increases the risk that these programs will not be sustainable. Ultimately, this could lead to millions of dollars in lost revenue as aspiring entrepreneurs are left without places to go for the counseling they need.

Policy Recommendations from Women Business Owners

Key recommendations from town hall meeting participants included:

- Increased outreach and marketing by the many programs that are designed to assist women business owners
- Continued and increased funding for government-supported entrepreneurial development centers like Women's Business Centers, Small Business Development Centers, and SCORE
- An evaluation of the SBA backed lending programs to determine if they are meeting the needs of the small business owners to which they are targeted
- Monitoring of the Federal government contracting process to ensure that the five percent set-aside target for women-owned businesses is met
- Enforcement of subcontracting relationships to hold prime contractors accountable for fulfilling their agreements with subcontractors
- Establishment of a clearinghouse for information on government contracting and subcontracting opportunities which may be set-aside for women-owned businesses
- Tax incentives to help small business owners do the things that they value doing—such as offering health insurance or wellness programs and providing education and training for their workers
- Helping small businesses tap into the lessons and best practices from large companies by looking across successful corporations and disseminating information about model programs

This research was conducted for the National Women's Business Council (NWBC) by Synthesis Professional Services. The opinions and recommendations of the authors of this study do not necessarily reflect official policies or positions of the NWBC, the U. S. Small Business Administration or any other agency of the U. S. Government.