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A VIEW FROM THE CHAMBER

BY MICHAEL BENNETT

"Striving to Achieve Economic Parity" — that is the motto of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania (AACCWP). The Chamber has numerous highly successful programs to assist in achieving a level playing field for minority-owned businesses throughout the region. The AACCWP's core values are equity in opportunity, economic advancement, self-sufficiency and entrepreneurial excellence.

The Chamber was chartered in 1994 and officially opened for business in 1998 and is now the second largest chamber in the country according to the AACCWP with over 600 members throughout Western Pennsylvania. Under the leadership of Doris Carson Williams since 1998, the Chamber has made great strides in its 12 years of existence by developing a Business Institute along with a full array of benefits for their members. Those benefits include health, life and disability insurance, dental and vision plans, payroll services and so much more.

The Business Institute Program is designed to assist members and other minorities by giving them the tools necessary to expand their business opportunities. Among the guiding principles of the Institute are life-long learning, innovative thinking and meaningful partnerships.

The Institute, according to Williams, "was the result of a study of over 1,200 African-American businesses conducted by Merrill Lynch back in 2000." The study suggested that there were four key areas that would allow minority business to be more proficient. Those four areas are: finance, the utilization of technology, strategic planning and marketing, and legal knowledge.

Small business owners must apply to the program and commit for two-years. The Institute uses a variety of techniques, activities and information resources built around the four key areas mentioned above to teach business owners their craft. The Institute teachings covers three critical areas: educational programs and training, hands-on technical assistance and strategic mentoring.

Williams says the Institute offers workshops on money, marketing/branding and information technology. As part of the program, the Institute has an executive coaching program and the Chamber is in the process of establishing a program for small minority-owned businesses to obtain legal advice for a nominal fee in the first year before resorting to the attorney's normal pricing structure. That will enable small businesses to receive top-notch legal advice for a fraction of the normal cost.

Williams is very proud of her Chamber. They've been able to implement their programs and observe the success of several businesses thanks to their participation with the Business Institute.

Another program run by the Chamber that has proven successful is the Mentor Protégé. The goal of the program is to help African-American businesses build capacity. The program provides one-on-one access to the CEO of larger established companies. Participating members essentially get to pick the brain of their mentor and utilize or adapt that knowledge to their own company.

As most African-American business owners know, getting access to capital is difficult even in the best of circumstances. The Chamber provides referrals to firms and organizations that can assist in loan packaging and access to capital.

AACCWP also provides a great deal of technical assistance to its members on a wide variety of business issues such as start-ups, development of business plans, loan packaging, marketing, consulting and training.

When it comes to bids on public and private projects, knowing where to look and monitoring the notification process on a daily basis could prove to be a burden for small business with minimal staffing. Public and private businesses notify the AACCWP of upcoming projects and they in turn pass on this valuable information to their members.

To learn more about the good work of the AACCWP call (412) 392-0610 or go to their website aaccwp.com.



DORIS CARSON WILLIAMS