

Burlington, VT

Mayor Peter A. Clavelle

Women's Small Business Program (WSBP) and the Vermont Women's Business Center

The Women's Small Business Program (WSBP) was developed in 1989 through a cooperative effort of Trinity College of Vermont and the City of Burlington's Community and Economic Development Office (CEDO). At that time studies were showing that women in the area were both underemployed and unemployed. At the same time, women were beginning to start businesses in record numbers. WSBP's mission is to foster women's economic independence by helping them make informed choices and giving them the skills needed for entrepreneurial success. Small and micro-businesses are crucial to the Burlington economy, and WSBP has played an active role in supporting the growth of small businesses in Vermont.

In 1999, WSBP applied for and received a grant from the US Small Business Administration (SBA) to run the Vermont Women's Business Center (VWBC), which represents a partnership between WSBP and other statewide programs. The VWBC offers comprehensive services to assist start-up and established women-owned businesses to be more competitive locally and globally, and it offers a resource center accessible to women statewide through a website and toll-free number. VWBC offers programs in the areas of business development, technology training, procurement opportunities, counseling, lending assistance, mentoring, and networking.

WSBP's training programs emphasize the application of practical business skills, development of personal and professional skills and on-going support. WSBP helps participants identify and solve challenges that they face in starting a business. Program outcomes have given WSBP a strong reputation in the community. Area commercial loan officers praise the completed business plans of WSBP graduates as the most complete and realistic they see. Graduates credit the program with facilitating positive changes in their personal and professional lives due to increased self-confidence and skills, regardless of business ownership.

Businesses created and expanded have ranged from part time, seasonal, retail, prod-

uct, manufacturing, non-traditional trades and wholesale. The program encourages each participant to develop a business that meets their skills, goals, and passions, and to develop their own definition of success for their endeavors. Some examples of businesses that graduates of WSBP started in the City of Burlington include: Seven Days, a weekly newspaper; Common Threads, an upscale clothing store; Frames for You and Mona Lisa Too, a custom framing business; and Jazza Tings, a retail store featuring African art and unique imported gifts.

Core offerings include:

- **Starting a Business - Where to Begin?**
A panel of women business owners talks about their experiences and answers questions about self-employment.
- **Getting Serious**
A twelve hour course which enables participants to assess whether self-employment fits their needs and to develop a business idea.
- **Start-Up**
An intensive fifteen-week course to develop business skills and a business plan. The curriculum includes marketing, financial preparation, computer skills, and operations management skills. Scholarships for tuition include CDBG funds for Burlington residents.
- **Business Roundtables**
Group mentoring, by experienced business owners on topics such as marketing, employment issues, and financial management.
- **Working Solutions**
Seminars for micro-business owners focusing on topics to facilitate successful business operations.
- **Other Workshops and Collaborations**
WSBP offers training for targeted sectors of business owners. In 1996, in collaboration with the Child Care Resource and Referral Center, WSBP offered a nine-week business skills class for child care workers in Burlington's Enterprise Community. From 1997 to 1999, through a grant from Vermont Community Development program, WSBP



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"We think this [Women's Small Business Program] is a fine example of nurturing the small business sector, especially for those who have traditionally been left out of business ownership."

Program has been running 10 years

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collaborated with Vermont Adult Learning, an adult literacy program, to offer a combined decision-making, and literacy class.

- **Workforce Development**

WSBP currently has a grant from the Vermont Department of Employment and Training Welfare to Work Program to offer job retention training. The training, called "Workplace Success" teaches participants the skills necessary to maintain employment, such as communication skills, interpersonal skills, understanding the work environment, and organizational skills. A peer support group which features guest speakers on topics such as resume writing, financial management, and stress management follows the class.

WSBP and the VWBC have enhanced the ability of small business owners to be successful on their own terms, with knowledge and support. The program has allowed many women to take positive steps toward financial independence, while helping to maintain a vibrant business community.