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EIU business center offering ideas for survival in economic downturn

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CHARLESTON — When Stan Thurman joined Eastern Illinois University's Business Solutions Center four months ago, it was envisioned that he would be working primarily with startup enterprises.

However, thanks in part to the economy's downturn, at least half of the officials he counsels are affiliated with established small businesses.

"We are seeing, with the economy the way it is, our services are needed every bit as much if not more for existing businesses," said Thurman, a former business owner who now works as a counselor for the BSC.

The center is promoting Thurman's visits to satellite BSC offices throughout the region, as well as a series of classes, to help small businesses weather the economic meltdown. The keys to the BSC efforts are the close proximity and availability of counselors, and the interactive aspects of the three upcoming sessions for small businesses, said officials.

Thurman appears at the Crossroads Workforce Investment Board site on Richmond Avenue in Mattoon on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays. He is at the Effingham Chamber of Commerce on North Keller Drive on Wednesdays, and at the Paris City Hall on the first and third Tuesdays of each month.

"Location, location, location," said Jeanne Dau, director of the BSC. "Just like in business, if you're in their community, if they see you visibly, they will be more inclined to seek out your services."

Thurman and the EIU branch of SCORE, Counselors to America's Small Businesses, counseled almost 60 people since July 1, according to the BSC. The counseling is free and confidential for small businesses and non-profit organizations.

To make an appointment, call 581-2913.

Following the success of the "Wallstreet Bailout/Main Street Fallout" panel discussion in October at EIU, the BSC is organizing a three-part series of training sessions called "Jumpstarting Your Business or Organization in 2009." Veteran business officials will discuss key aspects to surviving financial difficulties.

The sessions will feature panel presentations followed by small group discussions and then, if requested, individual counseling by Thurman and volunteers from SCORE, which is partnering with the BSC.

"It will be very interactive," said Dau. "It will not just be listening to a lecture.

"You're going to hear from people who have been through it themselves."

The sessions cost \$25 each, although there is a discount totaling \$15 for those who sign up for all three. The sessions are:

n "Top 10 Ways of Reducing Costs," 8:30 a.m. to noon Feb. 11, Charleston Carnegie Public Library.

n "Enhancing Sales Without Increasing Your Marketing Budget," 8:30 a.m. to noon Feb. 25, Crossroads Workforce Investment Board training center, Mattoon.

n "Recognizing New Opportunities," 8:30 a.m. to noon, Midland States Bank, 1901 S. Fourth St., Effingham.

For more information or to reserve a space, call the BSC at 581-2913.

Not that the BSC has abandoned its pledge to help startup businesses. On the contrary, the economic downturn may translate to new opportunities as niches are created when certain businesses go belly-up, or unemployed people adopt an entrepreneurial spirit, said Dau.

With this in mind, "We have quite a few how-to-start-a-business classes" in collaboration with SCORE, she said.

Many of these will be offered early in 2009, when New Year's resolutions are still in effect, she also said.

The classes will be held 6-9 p.m. Jan. 27 at the Charleston Carnegie Public Library; 6-9 p.m. Feb. 2 at Midland States Bank in Effingham; at 6-9 p.m. Feb. 19 at the Service Learning Building in Sullivan.

"It's really the nuts and bolts of starting your own business," said Dau.

Call 581-2913 for more information.

The East Central Open group and the BSC are organizing a forum from noon to 1:30 p.m. Jan. 28 at the Mattoon Country Club, where local entrepreneurs and investors alike are invited to learn about opportunities with venture capitalists and "angel investors."

Dau said only 35 percent of patents from this region of the country are assigned to local companies. That means most local innovations are being bought up by venture funding groups and corporations elsewhere.

The only cost is for a meal.

"We want to identify people that may be interested in investing locally," said Dau. "We're trying to bring ideas to the money."

For more information on this forum, email Trisha Mason at tmason16617@lakeland.cc.il.us.

For non-profit organizations, the BSC is partnering with the Lumpkin Family Foundation to offer a class about how to benefit from Web 2.0. It will be held from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Jan. 29 at the Crossroads center in Mattoon. It costs \$20 and includes lunch.

To register, email Becky Stroud at becky_stroud@consolidated.com.

Contact Nathaniel West at nwest@jg-tc.com or 238-6860.

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