

Building Connections

Strengthening Businesses in Mason County WA

According to the US Census Bureau 17.3% of Mason County lives below poverty level, which is 25% higher than the Washington State average. With the sale of two of our mills and the imminent shutdown of a large plywood mill Mason County is facing the loss of a little over 500 manufacturing jobs. According to the input/output model of economic modeling, there is a 1.6 multiplier effect of those jobs which brings the total loss to more than 800. Given the already existing poverty levels, this is devastating to our rural community.

This initiative proposes a strategy to build economic strength in Mason County through the support of small enterprises (5 or fewer employees) with focused business training, technical assistance and microloans up to \$25,000 for start-up or expansion. We know that when companies are strong, they hire more people and these jobs strengthen families and grow our region's resources that businesses in Mason County rely on. Enterprise for Equity, a regional non-profit with a 15 year track record, will serve entrepreneurs with low-to-moderate incomes and provide business training and resources that balance social, economic and ecological priorities in the region. This initiative works directly with local leadership of the Economic Development Council of Mason County (EDC) and the Washington State University Mason County Extension (WSU) to provide small companies throughout the county, from Belfair to Shelton, a seamless menu of relevant training resources, business services, micro-loans and meaningful connections with other businesses in local industries.

There is not a physical location as the training will be offered throughout all of Mason County, even within the more remote locations, based on the response during outreach. The majority of the workshops and training programs will occur in Belfair and Shelton. There are seven key components:

- Outreach to rural communities via our partners to find and connect with people interested in self-employment and business owners in need of business resources;
- Orientation events that begin to build connections with other business owners and resources to help them grow their companies;
- Business training, tools and technical assistance for people (with 5 or fewer employees) who are interested in starting small businesses or strengthening existing enterprises;
- Specific industry initiatives that can bridge connections and build strength among the priority areas highlighted in Mason County's Sparking Solutions summary; connections with workforce partners for their employment needs;
- Support for employees and others with financial education and asset building programs that assist participants in moving out of poverty toward prosperity;
- Support for business start-up or expansion through microlending and connections with SBA partners and other financial options;
- Business Builder workshops that assist existing business owners with accounting, social media, customer services, contracting and other programs as needed.

Washington State University Extension will work directly with Mason County to administer the grant, serving to support the county in administration, oversight and reporting on program timeline, deliverables and outcomes. Enterprise for Equity, Economic Development Council of Mason County and WSU Extension will serve as primary contractors with the County, with WSU Extension being responsible for managing distribution of program funds for outreach, professional training and program services and overseeing evaluation of programs using existing measures.

Contact Lynn Longan, EDC of Mason County for more information at (360) 426-2276 or email lynn@masonedc.com