

# **Building Connections Strengthening Businesses Phase II 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 shutdown of a large plywood mill Mason County faced the loss of a little over 500 manufacturing jobs. Although there have been new jobs created over the last three years, the 1.6 multiplier effect of those initial job losses brought total losses to more than 800. Our rural communities are seeing some gains and stimulating new business growth will ensure stability moving forward.

This initiative proposes a strategy to build on the momentum and success of the 2016-2018 microenterprise development project aimed at building the 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. **If funded, this next phase will draw upon lessons-learned, partnerships forged, reputation and name recognition built and program evaluation results to launch start-ups and support existing businesses with training, technical assistance and microloans over the period of the grant.**

*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 (E4E), a regional non-profit with a 19 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), the North Mason Chamber of Commerce (NMCC) 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, Hoodspport, Allyn 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;
- Information sessions/business development conversations 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;
- 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 and technical assistance by all partners that assists existing business owners with ongoing accounting, social media, customer service, contracting and other programs and ensure deep connections with existing partners in the community for long term networking and support.

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, North Mason Chamber of Commerce and WSU Extension will serve as primary liaison with the County and with contractors, with WSU Extension being responsible for overseeing evaluation of programs using existing measures.