

Create Bridges program boosts rural small businesses

By Greta Hacker

Our longtime approach to rural economic development has centered on helping communities recruit traditional industries. We have built and maintained large industrial facilities to make small towns attractive places for big business to settle. However, recent trends in economic development theory and practice suggest that industry recruitment is not the biggest factor in economic growth, especially for rural communities. According to the Brookings Institution in 2017, most rural Americans are employed by small businesses, with only 5 percent of rural workers holding agricultural jobs and only 15 percent holding positions in manufacturing. If community leaders want to increase economic prosperity, they need to go local by focusing on the smaller businesses and industries that already exist in their areas.

In an effort to foster rural economic growth in Arkansas by supporting small businesses and industry, the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture launched the Create Bridges program in partnership with the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC). The program's title stands for Celebrating Retail, Accommodations, Tourism and Entertainment by Building Rural Innovations and Developing Growth Economies, and as its name suggests, it is focused on raising awareness and providing resources for small businesses and industries in Arkansas. The program serves the Ozark Foothills region encompassing Sharp, Izard and Fulton counties and the 3Cs (Cossatot Community Connection) region encompassing Little River, Sevier and Howard counties.

The program's first year consisted of a series of citizen focus groups, surveys and broad community engagement. Information collected from these inquiries was used to implement a variety of targeted support programs and strategies in the two regions identified.

One of the major challenges facing small business owners in Arkansas that the Create Bridges program addresses is technological proficiency and access. The program found that many small business owners needed support in marketing their business

on the web, getting information out to their customers about their services and maintaining a positive online presence.

To improve technological proficiency among small business owners, Create Bridges created a series of instructional videos directed at small business owners. Each short video shows business owners how to create and manage online profiles on Google My Business, Facebook, TripAdvisor and Yelp.

"The goal of the instructional videos was to break down the process of online engagement and make it as simple as possible for business owners" said Julianne Dunn, state lead for the Create Bridges program. The four platforms were chosen for their potential to provide good return on investment by helping businesses get direct exposure online, for their user-friendliness and because none of them required constant updates and access, which may be labor-intensive for a small business owner.

The Create Bridges program has also focused on fostering resiliency among the state's small business owners amid the hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this goal, the program launched the "Small Business—Big Rural Impact" podcast in October of 2020. Hazelle Whited, regional program coordinator for the Ozark Foothills region, said the series "has provided not only an avenue for business owners and community leaders to share their stories of how they persevered through the pandemic, but future entrepreneurs or current owners weathering their own storms were able to feel they were not alone in their experience."

A third focus area of the program is on workforce development and education. Early research and consultation with communities performed during the first stages of the Create Bridges program revealed that despite retail, tourism and accommodation industries

employing the majority of rural communities' workforces, few opportunities exist for workforce training among these sectors. To fill this gap in education, Create Bridges launched Create Lift (Celebrating Retail, Accommodations,



Tourism and Entertainment by Leading Innovation through Workforce Training) in July of this year. Create Lift is a certification program for employees in these sectors, and it focuses on helping workers develop job skills and knowledge in areas such as customer service, hospitality, technology and marketing.

The program has already achieved meaningful local impacts in the targeted communities. “In the 3Cs area, we had a bilingual business owner start a business through one of the projects Create Bridges brought forth in partnership with [the Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development Center],” Whited said. “In the Ozark Foothills, we recently learned of a business that utilized the Google My Business video to claim their own page that has generated several sales after customers searched and found their business using that platform.”

The program has also garnered support and buy-in from local community leaders and elected officials, like Cave City Mayor Jonas Anderson. “Create Bridges, and the folks behind the effort, are proving to be an incredible resource for small business and economic development in our region’s cities and towns,” Anderson said.

To learn more about the Create Bridges program, access support resources and contact the Create Bridges team, visit www.uaex.uada.edu/business-communities/strategic-planning/create-bridges.aspx. 🏠



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