

Interagency Network of Enterprise Assistance Providers- An unusual partnership of government agencies and private businesses communicate and collaborate to enhance services to small business.

In today's interconnected world collaboration needs to be routine and continuous. In 2006, this need led to the formation of a more formal public/private network, the Interagency Network of Enterprise Assistance Providers (INEAP).

INEAP is a coalition of people from federal (and some private and nonprofit) organizations whose primary mission is to assist small businesses. It has three major goals:

1. Establish and maintain positive relationships among the people who run these programs.
2. Use those relationships to learn about the various programs—what they offer, whom they serve, and what if any collaborative relationships they currently have with related programs.
3. Use that knowledge to find opportunities to collaborate and improve services to small businesses.

INEAP members come from over forty-five business and technical assistance programs, including the SBA; Export- Import Bank; U.S. Departments of Commerce (DOC), Labor (DOL), and Energy (DOE); and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The U.S. Women's Chamber of Commerce, American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), and other nonprofit organizations are also involved.

INEAP's stakeholders are other federal, state, and private providers that offer services to or have a network with small and medium-size businesses. Congress is also a customer and stakeholder.

Fifteen to forty INEAP members, depending on the agenda, meet monthly. The meetings typically help members learn about other programs' offerings. Each meeting focuses on a theme: support to veteran-owned businesses, international trade and financing, loan programs to businesses, and the like. Between meetings, various INEAP members forge the formal and informal partnerships that actually accomplish the network's goals.

INEAP has no senior sponsor, no formal charter, and no official mandate. It operates with a few ground rules (such as respect members and each other's programs and commit to sharing program information), but compared with some partnerships, it functions in a very informal manner. Members prefer it that way because the low profile keeps bureaucracy to a minimum.

Antonio Doss, the director of SBA's Small Business Development Centers, and Carroll Thomas, partnership catalyst for MEP and author of this article, founded this interagency group and facilitate the monthly meetings. We recently established an executive core council of the most active INEAP members, which shares the leadership tasks. Meetings rotate among the members' downtown offices. When resources (people, meeting rooms, and the like) are needed, the leaders ask members to contribute them. High technology has not played a major role in the network's operation, but INEAP does make occasional use of the Web, and its Web

site— [www.ineap.nist.gov/ineap/home.ineap](http://www.ineap.nist.gov/ineap/home.ineap) —has an external and internal component. The internal area is for members to share information—on topics such as business disaster preparedness, computer recycling programs, and energy efficiency—with other members and their clients. INEAP also plans to offer a series of Webcasts on assistance programs for the taxpaying business owners its organizations serve. The major communication tool INEAP members use is an old-fashioned one—meeting and talking directly with each other to exchange information and find common purpose.

On September 26, 2007, fifteen INEAP members and visitors gathered at DOE in Washington, DC, for the monthly meeting, one that had a particular sense of energy and enthusiasm. Participants were from DOL, DOE, DOC, four EPA program offices, and the AACC. Members' presentations took up much of the time, but this meeting differed in the connection and synergy apparent in the room. One member discussed a partnership among several agencies and private-sector groups to reduce energy usage by 25 percent over the next decade, and its plan to post its methods, tools, and progress on a Web to share them with other companies. That got the attention of an EPA representative, who wanted to know more about the partnership and how the members were working together. That member then mentioned a consortium of college presidents who are meeting to find ways to reduce energy consumption on their campuses, which prompted someone else to talk about an upcoming conference on best practices in energy usage and lean methods within government agencies.

#### Green Suppliers Network

Before INEAP, MEP and EPA established the Green Suppliers Network (GSN), a collaboration between government and industry that focuses on the dual challenge of reducing the environmental impact of small and midsize manufacturing suppliers and increasing the companies' efficiency, productivity, and profitability. GSN employs "lean" and "clean" methods, which concentrate on the root causes of waste in a facility and provide a framework for achieving specific measurable environmental and business objectives. GSN helps companies in three areas: lean processes, reduced energy consumption, and reduced impact on the environment.

In Missouri, MEP had been working with EPA to identify companies interested in GSN reviews. At the same time, it was working with the local DOE industrial assessment center to identify and assist companies interested in energy assessments. And it was providing lean assessments to identify waste in processes and materials. The problem was that all three of these activities were happening separately. Jimmy Story, business program manager of the Missouri MEP, was looking for ways to offer the GSN package of three assessments as one package that made sense to the manufacturers. At an INEAP meeting in Washington, MEP and EPA program managers discussed the need to bring the three GSN elements together and learned that Jimmy Story was looking for the same thing at the field level. Through INEAP connections, Jimmy Story was able to get encouragement from several government program managers. He also received additional assessments from DOE (which provides them at no charge to companies) and learned how to seek additional funding from EPA to help defray the cost of environmental assessments.

The biggest winners of all are the fifteen manufacturers that are current Missouri MEP clients. Getting lean, clean, and energy efficient helped them to become more profitable and save on the cost of the assessments. Having the assessments rolled into one also cut the downtime of going through each assessment separately. Most important, integrating the assessments helped them save energy and improve the air quality of the plant. For more on GSN, go to [www.greensuppliers.gov/gsn/home.gsn](http://www.greensuppliers.gov/gsn/home.gsn).

Supporting and leading the partnership takes an enormous amount of time, due, in part, to the large number of established relationships. The leaders know investing time is key in relationship-building efforts and communicating these relationships. This groundwork allows the members to contact someone with whom they have an established relationship, cutting through the normal red tape of government-structured stovepipes.

In addition, each meeting requires preparation to pick appropriate themes and involves time-consuming follow-up afterward. "All INEAP members do this work on their own time," Doss notes. "Nobody's boss directs the members to participate. "That's testimony to the partnership's attractiveness. It's also a risk: if the members' managers have no stake in INEAP, they may not approve of the amount of time their subordinates put into the partnership. Happily, every INEAP member's supervisor has seen the value of this partnership and has supported the investment of time.

Two people perform much of the INEAP work. "Carroll is really the glue that keeps everything together," Doss says. "I do a lot, but she's critical to our success. So we need to develop an infrastructure to keep things moving if she (or I) can't continue contributing at this level." The recently created council will not only expand the number of people who feel ownership of the group, but will encourage succession planning for developing a new generation of leaders to assume some of the workload and continue efforts into the future.

*Excerpted from "The Public Manager" spring 2008 Russ Linden and Carroll Thomas*