

Charleston area to get SBA Women's Business Center as part of largest-ever rollout

BY EMILY WILLIAMS EWILLIAMS@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

JAN 11, 2021



A rendering of the Opportunity Center, a facility in North Charleston that will hold a new SBA Women's Business Center, in addition to offices for local nonprofits, a business incubator and other resources. Provided.

The Charleston area is getting a new Women's Business Center affiliated with the U.S. Small Business Administration as part of the largest-ever expansion in the program's 30-year history.

Increasing H.O.P.E., a North Charleston nonprofit that bills itself as a one-stop shop for financial training, was chosen to create one of the 20 new centers the SBA announced last week that it would launch across the U.S.

It will be the only center operating in the Charleston region and the third in South Carolina. CommunityWorks, a nonprofit in Greenville, hosts one, and the SBA launched another at Benedict College in Columbia, its second-ever center based at a historically Black college or university, last year.



BUSINESS

Benedict opens center to help women in business, a rarity for historically black colleges

BY MIKE FITTS MFITTS@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Dorothea Bernique, executive director at Increasing H.O.P.E., said the nonprofit first applied to host one of the centers early last year. They applied again when the SBA put out another call months later, and she learned just before the holidays that her organization had been chosen.

It was “perfect timing,” Bernique said, because of how the center’s launch will coordinate with the development of The Opportunity Center, a facility being set up in a former warehouse off Rivers Avenue in North Charleston.

Similar to the SBA Women’s Business Center program, the center’s purpose is to support under-represented entrepreneurs in the Charleston region, in addition to being an economically sustainable way to house the offices of a few nonprofits behind its creation.



BUSINESS

With a \$2.7M federal grant, business ‘opportunity center’ coming to North Charleston

BY EMILY WILLIAMS EWILLIAMS@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Increasing H.O.P.E. will be moving its offices to the Opportunity Center along with its partners in the project which include the Center for Heirs Property Preservation and the S.C. Association for Community Economic Development, or SCACED.

The building is also going to house a business incubator, a career training facility and, now, a SBA-affiliated Women’s Business Center.

“It’s just an amazing addition to the entrepreneurial ecosystem we’re building,” Bernique said of the Women’s Business Center.

The center will be operated separately from Increasing H.O.P.E., Bernique said, so her first task is finding a team to run its programming, which will eventually include one-on-one counseling, networking, workshops and technical assistance for women entrepreneurs.

They’ll have services to support women at any stage in their business, Bernique said, whether they’re at the point of developing their idea or have run their business for years. Knowing how many small businesses have had to close amid the coronavirus pandemic — Black-owned businesses, in particular, were closing at rates twice that of other businesses — Bernique said it’s likely people will need help either getting their business back on track or charting a new course.

In the last year, the existing network of Women’s Business Centers has helped small businesses to “pivot with confidence to stay afloat during the pandemic,” SBA administrator Jovita Carranza said in an announcement about the rollout of new centers last week.

The expansion of the program will “boost timely resources to our nation’s female economic drivers,” Carranza said.

Locations for the new centers prioritized “rural and underserved markets,” per the SBA.

Accessibility to the communities they are trying to serve was key when they chose the location for the Opportunity Center, Bernique said. It’s located on a main thoroughfare in North Charleston with a nearby bus stop.



Small Business Administration chief Jovita Carranza (center) talks with Coastal Coffee Roasters owner Brad Mallett, as Gregg White (right) looks on, during a tour of the Summerville business in September 2020. File/Brad Nettles/Staff

BUSINESS

SBA chief tours Summerville small businesses that used PPP, talks next ‘wave’ of aid



BY EMILY WILLIAMS EWILLIAMS@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

In mid-2019, the Opportunity Center project received a \$2.7 million federal grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce. The funding came from an Economic Development Administration Program that provides assistance to “regions experiencing adverse economic changes.”

A groundbreaking event will be hosted at the Opportunity Center later this month, Bernique said, and a move to the center will likely happen early in the summer.

The SBA will support the business center with annual grants of \$125,000 for up to five years, but those funds have to be matched, so Bernique said they are currently seeking sponsors for the facility.

Reach **Emily Williams** at 843-607-0894. Follow her on Twitter [@emilye_williams](https://twitter.com/emilye_williams).

EMILY WILLIAMS

Emily Williams is a business reporter at The Post and Courier, covering tourism and aerospace. She also writes the Business Headlines newsletter and co-hosts the weekly news podcast Understand SC.