



Testimony of
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on behalf of the
Association of Women's Business Centers to the
U.S. House of Representatives
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Community Support:
Entrepreneurial Development and Beyond

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Testimony of Stephanie Carter: *Community Support: Entrepreneurial Development and Beyond*

Thank you, Chairman Kelly, Ranking Member Adams and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to share this testimony with you. My name is Stephanie Carter, and I am founder and President of SCB Management Consulting. SCB resolves complex business challenges and develops tailored solutions for corporate executives, public sector organizations, and business owners. SCB's core services are program and project management, risk management, strategic planning and business process improvement.

I am testifying today on behalf of the Association of Women's Business Centers (AWBC), which supports the national network of Women's Business Centers (WBCs) by providing training, mentoring, programming, and advocacy with the goal of improving services to women entrepreneurs. The AWBC's membership includes all of the 107 WBCs throughout the United States.

As you know, the Women's Business Center program is a public-private partnership with 30 years of success in providing training, counseling, mentoring, and access to capital to women entrepreneurs across the country. Women and business like me and SCB.

Before I begin, let me thank the subcommittee for holding this hearing today. Understanding the challenges of launching and growing a business is difficult, and too often we do not fully recognize the factors at the periphery of traditional business creation—despite their importance. I fully believe that the community fostered by the WBC played a key role in my success, and its replication can only mean good things for women entrepreneurs nationwide.

Strength in Numbers

Business success is predicated on a host of factors, ranging from the expertise of the business owner, to wisdom of the business plan, to the ability to access capital, to picking the right location or marketing, to hiring the right staff. When a business succeeds or fails, there are so many variables to point to as a driver of where an entrepreneur made or did not make it.

What is undeniable, however, is that those businesses that have a network of support behind them fare better than those without. In my view, here are a few reasons why this is.

First, a network allows you to problem solve the early crises of launching and growing a business. Along the way, whether its incorporation or tax questions, to the logistics of office space or your first hire, there are myriad challenges in every business. When you have a network of fellow entrepreneurs you can collectively solve – and even anticipate – many of these issues.

Second, a strong community helps identify new opportunities. Every business, whether five minutes or 5 generations old, is seeking new opportunities. A community that understands your business and its offerings is incredibly helpful in spotlighting business development. Similarly, it also allows for teaming of entrepreneurs who may collectively offer an innovative solution to the market than individually is not available.

Finally, and perhaps the hardest to define but also the most important, a community and network gives you the confidence to become an entrepreneur and the persistence to thrive after your business is created.

For these reasons, developing communities of support around women entrepreneurs should be considered critical. The potential of the nation's 11 million women business owners thrives only when the challenges of business can be addressed through sufficient access to counsel.

The Role of Women's Business Centers in Fostering Community

The network of 150 women's business centers service locations across the country spend each day unlocking this potential—and addressing those challenges. The WBC program plays a different role to each of the two million women who have walked through our doors, but in so doing, has created a community *of* two million women entrepreneurs.

A study of WBC clients done by the Center for Women's Business Research found that, aside from general business management information, gaining financial management skills, and learning about the legal aspects of organizing a business, what the clients valued highly from their experience in the center was finding a community of other women with whom to build relationships. Unlike a "transactional" short-term course – after which a prospective business owner is on their own – women's business centers provide a venue for ongoing learning and relationship-building.

Simply put, the WBC's role is the glue of the women's entrepreneurial ecosystem. In communities that have WBCs, entrepreneurs of all kinds are developing the skills and confidence to launch or grow their business.

How WBCs and Community Support Helped SCB

I launched my business after nearly twenty years in corporate consulting and internal leadership roles. While I had the business, finance and operations foundation of my MBA and corporate roles, there were many aspects of entrepreneurship that I felt I needed including legal, tax, sales and marketing.

I began enrolling in Entrepreneur and Business Planning Courses with the Women's' Business Development Center in Center City Philadelphia and the SBDC in Baltimore in early 2016.

Once I was in the Washington DC area, and with the public sector being one of the greatest opportunities for consulting, I embarked on learning as much as I could to help me directly penetrate the market and begin to grow my business. I took my first seminar with the WBC in July 2017 “Orientation to Small Business Resources-Montgomery County.” During that session I learned about other WBC courses including the Procurement Series offered by Prince Georges County and Montgomery County. I started that six-part series in August 2017 because it offered a host of information about accessing the public sector market. The series culminated with a matchmaking session with procurement specialists in November.

I enrolled in the Procurement Series for the business development information, however, gained several relationships that ultimately formed a community of support for my business:

- The WBC counselor who facilitated the series has become a great ongoing resource for business development opportunities as well as other information I may need including securing office space.
- I forged a partnership with one of the speakers who noticed during my ‘elevator pitch’ that we may have some synergies, and currently pursuing business development opportunities together.
- I included one of the Procurement Series participants who is just starting her consulting business, in a recent bid.
- Public sector panelists have been very accessible and helpful in gaining a greater understanding of their respective organizations.

It also is not just the network at the WBCs alone that has provided benefit. I learned of other networks at the WBC that I should engage and have expanded my ability to grow my business through them. There is an exponential impact of the initial network supplied by the WBC.

I learned through the WBC courses that an effective market penetrator for new entrepreneurs such as myself are Woman Business Enterprise (WBE) and Minority Business Enterprise (MBE) certifications. I began the process in 2017 and now certified in all qualifying categories. As a newly certified WBE and MBE, I regularly attend informational and matchmaking sessions offered by the certifying agencies.

I also attend a variety of forums such as Pre-Bid Conferences, Economic Forums, and State of Maryland “Ready, Set, Grow” monthly informational sessions offered by the Governor’s Office that also offer the opportunity to meet industry leaders. As a result, I have begun to forge new relationships in the public sector. Some of these relationships are leading to immediate collaborations while others are laying the foundation for long-term mutual relationships.

I am also a member of the DC Chapters of the Financial Executives International (FEI) and the Risk and Insurance Management Society (RIMS). I was previously with other business organizations, however, have generally found daytime chapter meetings are not conducive to my subcontracting engagements.

Furthering Community Support

One of the first questions I often receive in these networks is “where do you live?” People are consistently shocked that I have traveled from Calvert County to Baltimore, Columbia, Northern Virginia, etc. to attend an event. However, opportunities for the information and access that I need generally are not offered in Southern Maryland.

My example is not unique. Companies hover around these networks and we must do a better job of creating communities of support in areas that need business growth the most.

Similarly, we must continue to enhance the WBC program at SBA. With jurisdiction over the program, this Committee has the opportunity to make the benefits I have experienced more widespread. The limitations of an outdated authorization are evident in the day-to-day experiences of these centers.

I encourage policymakers to consider legislation that would allow for more flexibility for WBCs—particularly eliminating the many burdens they face and choose not to operate in certain areas.

The role of AWBC, who I am representing here today, should also be leveraged. Through statute, we should build on the best practices of other resource partners and allow for accreditation. Part of this process would ensure that every WBC has the skilled resources to develop communities of support for women business owners.

Finally, Congress should increase the visibility of the WBC program. I encourage this Committee to use its’ extensive media abilities to talk about WBCs. The more we do that, the larger the community of support becomes.

The commitment of this Committee to the WBC program deserves recognition as Congress is working to enhance WBC’s role in fostering a positive environment for women entrepreneurs. We are grateful to Committee Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Velazquez and Representatives Knight and Lawson for introducing legislation to re-authorize the program. Representative Stephanie Murphy, too, championed the program and restored to the FY2018 WBC funding the additional \$1 million in appropriations included in FY2017.

These actions make the WBC’s role in the broader women’s business community profound. I am excited that they will continue their work and continue to support the growth of women’s entrepreneurship and the community of support created by this important program.

Conclusion

In closing, I appreciate the opportunity to celebrate the unstoppable community of women-owned businesses and the impact they are having on our nation’s economy and to update this subcommittee on the role that community played in my success. Many challenges remain for

women-owned businesses, but we have only begun to tap the potential of this economic powerhouse.

With the help of the Congress, the SBA, and the WBC Program, I believe we can continue to build a community of support that will allow women entrepreneurs and small business owners around the country to realize their full entrepreneurial potential and contribute significantly to economic growth and job creation.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify.