

Contracts for woman-owned business continue to miss the mark

Apr. 24, 2014 - 06:00AM | By Elissa Nadworny Medill News Service | [Comments](#)[Recommend](#) 0

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Sandra Wiggins, a former federal employee, is now looking to use her experience in her latest venture as a consultant. (Elissa Nadworny)

Sandra Wiggins worked as a human resources specialist for the federal government for more than 35 years across seven different agencies, including 16 in the Defense Department. Now she's using that expertise to run her own company, hoping to cash in on the billions in federal contracts designated for woman-owned small businesses.

"I feel like I have done everything I wanted to do within the federal sector," Wiggins, now CEO of Wiggins HR Consulting. "I understand federal resources, so it just makes sense for me to do my own thing and get in on the contracts."

The federal government awards an average of \$500 billion a year in federal contracts — 5 percent of which is set aside for woman-owned businesses, a standard set by the Small Business Administration's Women-Owned Small Business Federal Contracting program in 2011.

And yet, the federal government has never actually reached that threshold.

Last year, \$15.4 billion in federal contracts went to woman-owned businesses, about 4 percent of the total amount dished out by the government, according to the SBA.

SBA's original program had a \$4 million and \$6.5 million limit on contracts designated for woman-owned businesses. But most federal contracts were larger than the cap, effectively making it a disincentive. The Obama administration lifted that cap last year, a move the SBA says should help the government meet the 5 percent goal this year.

But adjusting the rules is only part of the issue. Another reason woman-owned small businesses aren't getting more federal contracts may be an inability to grow as fast as male-owned businesses.

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"Women small business owners are actually starting businesses at a higher rate than men, but are reaching the \$1 million [revenue] mark at a much lower percentage," said Dayna De Simone, director of OPEN Live, the events arm of American Express's small business division, which is partnering with the SBA to improve the odds for women who want to run their own businesses.

"Our research shows that there are a few gaps in competence, confidence and connections that women need to get them to the same level as men," she said. "We feel like we can fill that gap."

The new ChallengeHer collaboration between the Small Business Administration, Women Impacting Public Policy and American Express OPEN aims to educate and equip women to compete for government contracts.

During a recent ChallengeHer event hosted by the Energy Department, N'Teasha Bronlee began seriously thinking about leaving her IT job in the Marine Corps and starting her own consulting company.

"I really wasn't aware of all the opportunities that I have as a woman and as a veteran," said Bronlee. "It's overwhelming as all get-out, but it's an awesome feeling to know what they need for contracts."

But the transition from federal employee to owner of a small business isn't an easy one, said former NASA Chief Information Officer Linda Cureton.

Cureton left NASA a year ago to start her own company, Muse Technologies, and is working on organizational development projects with the Department of Housing and Urban Development and waiting to hear back on several contracts her company has bid on over the last year.

"When I made the decision to do this, I said, 'Why not open doors for myself?'" Cureton said. "I'd rather control my own destiny than work for somebody else and have my destiny put in their hands."

Cureton advises federal employees hoping to start their own businesses to leave their ego at the door and always be willing to learn.

"It's not just who you know," she said. "I pretty much know every CIO across the executive branch. And let me tell you, it doesn't make a contract. You've got to have a good solution, have that solution articulated clearly and offer a good value."

To help women business owners better understand what agencies are looking for in contractors, ChallengeHer events connect them with contracting officers and small business program managers. The sponsoring partners have online tools for helping businesses get certified, identifying agencies to target, marketing and networking.

Wiggins advised women with small business ideas to understand

the time needed to get a business up and running. She said it has taken her six months to be ready to vie for federal contracts, including completing the certifications required by the SBA.

For Bronlee, meeting other female business owners like Wiggins and connecting with people at the Energy Department was enough to convince her to start the process.

"I was seriously overthinking it, and now that I'm learning more about it, it seems more doable, less scary," Bronlee said. "I was going to wait until next year, but now I want to start next week."

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**Diane Hahn Bellegarde** · CEO & President at SoundWay Consulting Incorporated
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For additional information, please read: <http://www.washingtonexec.com/2013/11/diane-bellegarde-soundway-discusses-sba-women-owned-small-business-program-quest-parity/>

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