

Recruiting program for entrepreneurs begins in Tri-State

By *BETH CRACE - The Independent*

ASHLAND A program to designed to identify and nourish local entrepreneurial talent is under way, with recruiters scavenging the Tri-State area seeking out potential business pioneers.

Led by Citynet founder Mark Burdette, the effort was initiated last year by the staff at Advantage Valley, a business partnership made up of eight counties in Kentucky, West Virginia and Ohio. Burdette said the group is in the process of gathering local Entrepreneurs in order to create the "Entrepreneurial League System."

"Myself, being an entrepreneur, I said, 'We need this,'" Burdette said. "I could see the value of having an entrepreneurial system."

For now, the goal is to create a network of 48 entrepreneurs out of Advantage Valley's service area, who will meet regularly beginning as early as this fall. Group members will enjoy relationships with business mentors, who will coach them through the process of starting a business from financial planning to thinking like CEOs.

"Entrepreneurs tend to isolate themselves," Burdette explained. "This is a good way for them to have a place to go and learn from each other."

To get involved, entrepreneurs must have already started their venture. Other criteria require ELS members be engaging in entrepreneurship; operating a startup venture within an existing company or a number of companies; or attempting to reinvent an entire business.

There is no fee to participate, Burdette said.

The program was designed by Dr. Tom Lyons, director for Research on Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Development at the University of Louisville, and Dr. Gregg Lichtenstein. The ELS borrows a coaching technique from professional baseball, dividing levels of entrepreneurs into major, minor, and rookie levels, who will meet monthly to discuss the trials and tribulations of the business world.

Over time, Burdette sees potential to convert the Advantage Valley area into a hub for budding entrepreneurs, a category of business people he described as possessing a unique vision and desire to see their idea transformed into a successful venture.

Compiling a pool of entrepreneurs will change the culture of the area, Burdette said, creating a system to teach the necessary skills to succeed and growing the area's workforce.

Mick Fosson, director of the Kentucky Innovation Center on Winchester Avenue, sees the same kind of potential for the ELS, and other programs of

the like. He said increasing the number of entrepreneurs and enhancing local businesses, will help grow the economy without having attract big companies to the area.

He pointed out while 1,500 U.S. companies relocate each year, there are 30,000 entities who try to recruit them.

"Going out and trying to recruit big companies into our area... Sure, we want to do it whenever we can," said Fosson. "But the chances of success are maybe 2 percent."

He said the area would benefit greatly by growing local businesses, contending if the 1, 477 businesses in Boyd County each added one new job, the economic payoff would be \$118 million into the community.

"We're going to figure out how to help businesses add that one more job," said Fosson, who works with the ELS.

Depending on the success of the Advantage Valley ELS, the concept potentially could be used as a model for other regions of the country, Burdette said.

"This area could become a mecca," he contended.

For more information on the ELS, call (304) 760-0950.

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