

The Columbus Dispatch

New fund aims to help minority businesses in Franklin County

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Franklin County has allocated \$2 million for grants and other assistance to Black- and other minority-owned businesses to help get them through the coronavirus pandemic. A Business Growth and Equity Alliance is being formed to provide further support.

Linwood Turner is stuck in a loop.

The 48-year-old is trying to establish and expand the trucking company he started about a year ago. He's finding clients who need supplies and products moved around town regularly. He wants to buy more trucks, hire drivers and open an office outside his home.

"I'm feeling positive; I'm feeling optimistic," he said. "If I can just get the funding ... I know I can take off."

But right now, Turner is making the rounds in a smaller box truck semis are too expensive at this point and trying to stay afloat during the coronavirus pandemic.

It's been a tough year for many businesses, and more so for African-American and other minority entrepreneurs, who often have a harder time gaining financial support for their startups and were disproportionately unsuccessful in securing federal Paycheck Protection Program funding earlier this year.

Business owners such as Turner can't get the financial support they need until their operations expand.

“They only want to help you if you’re already in position,” Turner said. “If you’re already in position, you don’t need the help.”

Franklin County officials hope that a new effort will help Turner and similarly situated minority business owners through the pandemic and beyond. The county has allocated \$2 million for grants and other assistance, and a Business Growth and Equity Alliance is being formed to provide further support.

“We believe in the work that small businesses are able to provide in this community and especially bring jobs into the community,” said Stephanie Hightower, president and CEO of the Columbus Urban League.

“Right now, about 51% of Black-owned businesses will not make it through COVID,” Hightower added. “I think this kind of equity alliance will bring those numbers down.”

The Urban League is administering the new equity fund, including \$1.6 million in grants to help Black- and other minority-owned businesses that have experienced drops of 25% or more in sales since mid-March. The remaining \$400,000 will pay for technical assistance to help minority businesses establish themselves and expand.

“The growth in our economy going forward ... is going to be rooted in small-business development,” said Franklin County Commissioner Kevin Boyce. “The place where there’s the most growth opportunity is with minority businesses. We’re thinking about post-COVID-19 ... and making sure that minority businesses not just make it past the pandemic ... but also thrive long term.”

County Administrator Kenneth Wilson said one goal of the initiative is to financially support disadvantaged businesses that were unable to secure federal support earlier this year.

“We do have an enormous crisis within our African-American community — the numbers are alarming,” said Kenny McDonald, CEO of One Columbus, a partner in the equity alliance.

The grant support couldn’t come too soon for business owners such as Tanika Harrison, whose Caring Hands Transportation of Ohio has been providing door-to-door, nonemergency medical-transportation services for more than a decade.

In February, Harrison was finalizing certification and an agreement that would have boosted her customer base. She was preparing to hire a receptionist and additional drivers to meet the expected demand.

Then COVID-19 hit, and her business hit a wall as regular clients turned to telehealth instead of in-person visits requiring rides to doctor’s offices, or they stopped going to grocery stores or other places.

Harrison and her husband and son are trying to keep the doors open and vehicles running, but the situation is tough. In May 2019, she said, the business made about \$20,000; in contrast, it took in about \$1,500 in May. A small PPP loan helped earlier this year, but that money's long gone.

"We're still running, we're still taking clients where they need to go," she said. "... Most people aren't going anyplace. I don't have enough coming in to continue. I really have a hard decision to make."

Todd Wilson transformed the general moving company started by his grandfather nearly a century ago into a specialty operation focused on relocating laboratories. In his three decades or so at the helm of Accelerated Laboratory Logistics, he has paid his bills and expanded his operations nationally.

Since the pandemic hit, his business has dropped about 30%, and he's watching other minority-owned businesses around town close their doors.

"Minority businesses really need some support," he said.

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