

MEMO

TO: Obama Small Business/Women's Entrepreneurship Presidential Transition Team
Ginger Lew, Reta Lewis
FR: Julie R. Weeks, President and CEO
DA: December 17, 2008
RE: Proposed Federal Actions in Support of Women's Enterprise Development

As a thought-leader involved in enabling women's enterprise here and abroad, Womenable humbly offers a few observations and suggestions concerning the most important structural issues that should be addressed in the weeks immediately following the inauguration. While the systems that support women's enterprise are an interconnected mix of public policy, private/third sector entrepreneurial support and actions taken by women entrepreneurs and their associations (see a [paper on this issue](#), which I wrote when I was the ED of NWBC), I focus here only on Federal program offices.

There are four key offices in the Federal government that support women's enterprise in one way or another – two that are programmatic or issue-focused (the SBA's [Office of Women's Business Ownership](#) and the [National Women's Business Council](#)) and two that primarily provide statistics or information (the U.S. Census Bureau's quinquennial [Survey of Business Owners](#) and the Department of Labor's [Women's Bureau](#)). Here are my recommendations on actions that could be taken immediately to improve the environment for nascent, new, and existing women business owners:

- **Reconstitute the Interagency Committee on Women's Enterprise:** This coordinating and communicating body was active prior to the most recent administration, and proved very useful in gathering input from the women's business community (especially on statistical and procurement matters) and making sure that there was a women's enterprise point of contact in nearly every Federal agency.
- **Expand the remit of OWBO:** While the SBA has three main branches (entrepreneurial education, financing and access to markets), the Office of Women's Business Ownership (OWBO) has historically only focused on the first, by managing the women's business center grants program. I believe that OWBO should also have an active role in ensuring that the SBA's access to capital and access to markets initiatives are meeting the needs of the Nation's (10.4/7.7) million (50%+/majority-owned) women-owned firms.
- **Reinvigorate the NWBC:** This office, created 20 years ago by the WBO Act of 1988, is in sore need of a transfusion of energy and a recommitment to its mission. In recent years it has suffered from interference from the SBA and has lost its bipartisan, independent role as a connective force and a voice for the women's business community in the Federal government. (See [my letter to Senators Kerry and Snowe](#) on this and the previous issue.)
- **Unleash the creativity of WBCs:** There's no other way of putting it – this program was severely pummeled during the entire Bush presidency, surviving only through the will of the women's business community and the support of the U.S. Congress. While it is now no longer in danger of disappearing, it needs stronger support from the SBA (oversight, not micromanagement), more funding, and encouragement to provide creative ideas to improve outcomes.
- **Widen the policy/program lens to include "the missing middle":** This is perhaps my most important recommendation, and certainly the most impactful in this time of economic crisis and the need for job creation. The Federal government has always been too "bi-polar" in its business support activities, either focusing on the "ABCs" of starting a business at one end of the spectrum or providing tax credits, incentives or bailouts for very large entities at the other

end. In between these two groups is the silent majority of the business population – the 90% or so of U.S. businesses that, for the want of enlightenment and a little kick-start, are loping along with little support or attention (hence the term “missing middle”). The owners of many of these firms want to grow, have a larger than average appetite for information and assistance, but don't know where to turn. (Read Womenable's research paper [“Mapping the Missing Middle”](#) for additional information from the women's enterprise perspective.) Many women's business organizations have seen that supporting growth-oriented initiatives is the wave of the future: Women Impacting Public Policy's [“Give Me Five”](#) campaign and Count Me In's [“Make Mine a Million \\$ Business”](#) initiative are two prime examples. Government ought to get on this bandwagon, too.

If you or members of your team have any questions or would like to discuss these ideas in further detail, I stand ready to assist in any way that I can.