

LED & A



Mary Lynn Wilkerson enjoys a cup of coffee at Lea's Pies in Monroe, just one of the many businesses aided by the Louisiana Small Business Development Center Network.

Mary Lynn Wilkerson

The Louisiana Small Business Development Center Network is a nationally accredited network of nine centers providing low- or no-cost guidance and training for small business owners and potential owners. It is supported by Louisiana Economic Development, the U.S. Small Business Administration and statewide university partners. Mary Lynn Wilkerson has served as state director since 2001.

[Q] What role do the Louisiana Small Business Development Centers play in the state's overall economic health?

[A] We contribute by helping small businesses start smart and helping existing businesses grow. In some cases we help individuals decide they should not start a business. At least half of the businesses we see are existing businesses with five or fewer employees and may be in the earlier, at-risk development stage. We help those businesses through the early years with one-on-one business counseling and training programs.

[Q] What kinds of issues do your clients typically present?

[A] Most businesses in the startup phase need help with business planning and preparing a loan proposal. Existing businesses are looking for help with cash flow or marketing assistance. Compliance is also an issue for small business, so we work closely with the IRS and other regulatory bodies to help clients meet those requirements.

[Q] What role do your support partners play?

[A] Without our partners, there would be no program. Over the last four years, we've received increases in state funding from legislators and LED. It shows a real commitment to small business and its

value in economic development because our clients create approximately 1,000 new jobs every year. This is the first year we've been included in the governor's executive budget, and we're very pleased with this administration's recognition, especially since funding was increased by 30 percent. With that increase, we should be able to provide consulting to an additional 420 entrepreneurs.

The SBA is our other primary funding partner. In 2009, the SBA awarded the network a \$2 million grant to assist small businesses after hurricanes Gustav and Ike. In addition to our normal funding, we will use these funds to make a big push for business preparedness and continuity.

The universities house our centers, connect us to the regions they serve and allow us access to students and faculty. Their faculty may teach training courses, such as marketing and QuickBooks, and serve as a valuable resource.

[Q] What does the future hold for the LSBDCs?

[A] For us to continue becoming more effective and efficient in how we serve our small businesses and entrepreneurs. The more we develop needed programs, whether it's disaster preparedness and response, or a tailored program, such as our Business of Art Summits, the more our clients will contribute to Louisiana's economy.