

**Testimony of Dr. Barbara Rackley
Rural Enterprises of Oklahoma, Inc.
Women's Business Center Program**

**United States House of Representatives,
Subcommittee on Rural Development, Entrepreneurship &
Trade, Committee on Small Business**

**"Legislative Initiatives to Modernize SBA's Entrepreneurial
Development Programs**

April 2, 2009

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Rural Development, Entrepreneurship & Trade Subcommittee, I am Dr. Barbara Rackley, coordinator of the Women's Business Center (WBC) of Rural Enterprises of Oklahoma (REI). I appreciate your invitation to appear before you to discuss H.R. _____, The Small Business Administration Women's Business Programs Act of 2009, sponsored by Oklahoma Congresswoman Mary Fallin. On behalf of REI, I am pleased to offer positive insight on important legislation, which will reauthorize the women's entrepreneurial development programs of the Small Business Administration.

Rural Enterprises is a statewide non-profit economic development organization that has assisted Oklahoma businesses and communities for more than 25 years. Our organization partners with state and local government and community entities to create jobs and promote economic growth across Oklahoma. One of our most successful initiatives is the Women's Business Center, which provides training and professional development services for women entrepreneurs. Services of our Women's Business Center are available statewide from two locations: Durant and Oklahoma City.

The mission of REI's Women's Business Centers is to assist Oklahoma's enterprising women entrepreneurs who want to start a business or expand an existing one. To date, we have assisted over 10,000 women entrepreneurs to help them reach their business ownership goals. It is safe to say that we would not be in a position to provide these essential services without the support and partnership of the Small Business Administration's Office of Women Business Ownership.

Our Rural Women's Business Center was first funded in 2001 to serve the southeastern quadrant of Oklahoma. At that time there were two centers in the Oklahoma City area that failed to complete their initial five year contract. This illustrates the importance of establishing the Women's Business Center within an organization such as REI. The REI Board of Directors views the WBC as an

integral component of the organization's economic development activities and state funding is secured for our matching funds.

At the end of the first five years, REI applied for another contract to expand services statewide so that women entrepreneurs across Oklahoma would have access to all the resources offered by Women's Business Centers. REI was successful in securing such an additional contract and ultimately opened its second Women's Business Center in Oklahoma City.

I am speaking today on behalf of Women's Business Centers and would like to share some real-life stories with you. We always talk numbers but for a few minutes please indulge me to talk about some of the wonderful women entrepreneurs we have in Oklahoma and how we have been able to assist them in their businesses.

We call one of our clients "the fudge lady" because she makes the best fudge you ever tasted. Her fudge must be purchased online because she is located in Battiest, OK, in the middle of the Ouachita Mountain range. This is almost on the Oklahoma-Arkansas border and one must know exactly where to go to find her. When she first contacted us, she was already making fudge but did not have a commercial kitchen. We were able to direct her to the proper resources to help her correctly establish a food business. Her husband built a commercial kitchen next to their house and she attended our e-Commerce class to learn more about doing business on the internet. Now, her business is established, she operates by all the standard health codes and she ships her fudge anywhere to anyone who shops online.

Many times our clients come to us after having already started their business. Sometimes they have already learned by their mistakes and then had to figure out how to overcome the obstacles. One of our women entrepreneurs started attending our training workshops as soon as we offered them in her community. She never missed a meeting. She even heard some of the presentations more than once. We noticed that during the networking time her response was always the same: *"Someday I am going to have my own business. I don't know what it is but I will have a business someday"*. After attending for almost two years and taking advantage of all the training -- from taxes to business plans to marketing and financing a small business, she opened a unique and very specialized gift shop on main street in Seminole, OK. It soon became a success.

Then, there is the client that started her company at her kitchen table as an independent software sales representative. She partnered her company with other major publishers to provide better valued research-based software to schools in Southeast Oklahoma for the best value. At the time the Women's Business Center was opening at REI, she was moving into one of our business incubators. She and her staff always take advantage of programs offered by the Women's Business Center. With an expanded staff for research and

development, her first software program took shape in 2006 with the launch of a web-based math facts fluency program. Now three years later, over 10,000 students in four states use this program everyday from school and home. When she started she had one employee. Now, she has 17 sales reps working in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska. Tonight, at the Durant Area Chamber of Commerce banquet this incredible lady's company will be recognized as the Small Business of the Year.

I should point out that training and assistance are provided in local communities. By working with partners in these communities, training workshops and networking opportunities are held in locations convenient to the women entrepreneurs, saving them both time and money.

Some of our business owners are beginning to feel the impact of the economic downturn. Although they need training, they will not have the extra money to pay for training workshops away from home. That puts even more value on the services of our Women's Business Center. The majority of our training workshops are absolutely free with an occasional minimal charge for full day training to cover expenses. These trainings include small business start-up basics, marketing, financing a business, business plan development, doing business with the government, and e-Commerce classes.

As the Women's Business Center was developing, one of the concerns that was being voiced by business owners and by lenders was the lack of accurate recordkeeping. We listened and then took action. We started classes in Quickbooks®. These classes require a computer lab and not all the areas we service have access to computer labs. To solve this problem, REI secured funding that provides our Women's Business Center with a portable lab of 12 laptops. These are in cases and readily available to travel to even the most remote areas. This training is provided for about one-third the cost of other Quickbooks® training classes and over the past three years we have trained hundreds of business owners.

The ladies we talked about earlier and everyone who attends our training workshops and networking events are the reason we need continued funding for Women's Business Centers. Many are starting their business with limited funds. Others are securing sizable loans to start their business. They do not have the extra resources to pay consultants to assist in developing a business plan, developing a marketing strategy or getting information for building a website. As previously stated, other training providers charge much more for the same classes we offer free and we teach them in the local community. There is not a greater return on investment than seeing an entrepreneur start a business, develop it, expand it, create jobs and ultimately celebrate success. When they succeed – we all succeed.

For the past eight years, I have been privileged to have a job that can be both fun and challenging but the greatest reward is meeting Oklahoma's enterprising women. I continue to be amazed not only at their creativity, but their relentless drive and determination to succeed in every area of their life. Thank you for this opportunity to speak on their behalf.