

## Agency wants to double gov't contracts

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Photo by Terry MillerSarah Wrasse

and Janice Campbell of the Procurement Technical Assistance Center in Kalamazoo.

He's a man on a mission.

Retired marine Major General Bradley Lott has a hard time sitting still. At an industrial real estate event in January, where he represented the Michigan Economic Development Corp.'s defense procurement initiative, Lott moved about the room, energized as he described the powerful push the state intends to make in securing government contracts for Michigan manufacturers.

"This year I want them to do over \$700 million in contracts," Lott said, noting that's double what the state sees now.

This small gathering in Grand Rapids at Grubb & Ellis|Paramount Commerce's annual Forecast event was the general's introduction to many in western Michigan. Though he spent many years off and on in the state, Lott moved back permanently in June to take over the Procurement Technical Assistance Center program, now nearly 20 years old.

In those two decades, the number of PTAC offices have shrunk from 26 to 11, lost 50 percent of their funding and operated without unified control.

PTACs assist businesses - typically manufacturers - often at no charge, in finding state and federal government solicitations, completing proposals and understanding requirements.

"Last year those offices brought in \$315 million worth of work into the state of Michigan - all Department of Defense work," Lott said. "I didn't say it in a vacuum. I said it with the trust and confidence they could do it, and with the trust and confidence Michigan manufacturers would step up. As impossible as it sounds, we have one of the PTACs (Macomb County) that has already met her 2008 goals in 90 days."

Western Michigan's two regional offices, based in Muskegon and Kalamazoo, have plans in place to reach their goals, including staff expansions and increased outreach, the directors said.

"We've never had funding where we could even advertise we exist," said Pamela Vanderlaan-Poort, director of the Muskegon Area First PTAC, covering 14 counties.

Two years ago, Michigan made a one-time allocation of \$10 million to the PTAC program, creating the Defense Contracting Coordination Center, or DC3, as the overseeing agency, with Lott at the helm.

Since then, Lott has pushed to standardize the offices in many ways, including job titles, training curriculum, forms and more, Vanderlaan-Poort said.

"Once we do standardize within the 11 PTACs, the message to companies will be the same," she said.

That's one leg, but to accomplish their goal, the PTACs must reach out to more companies and deeper within the ones they already assist.

"The Muskegon Area First PTAC has been either the top or one of the top performers for as long as I can remember," said Vanderlaan-Poort, who has worked there since 1989. "In 2005-2006, we had over \$93 million in contracts reported that we assisted with.

"The more the secret of the PTACs unfolds to the business community, the more we're going to be able to help companies."

Muskegon, as with the southwest Michigan PTAC, assists more than 200 companies, though only about a tenth of those win government contracts, said Janice Campbell, director of the Southwest Michigan Technical Assistance Center, hosted by the Kalamazoo Regional Chamber of Commerce.

"The most successful companies are the companies that have dedicated one or more people to work on government contracting," said Campbell, now in her 11th year at the PTAC.

That's a difficult thing for small businesses to accomplish, she noted, but as the economy pitches for manufacturers, the government can be a great customer, paying good money on time.

With that message, she intends to double her numbers this year by adding a third person to her staff, ferreting out subcontractor opportunities, increasing the contracts successful suppliers are winning and expanding south. Sarah Wrasse is procurement assistant.

"We plan to do more outreach into outlying areas. Benton Harbor-St. Joseph ... will be a focus," she said.

Last year, her office, covering seven counties, assisted in securing \$28.5 million in government contracts for Michigan companies. That compares to about \$19.6 million each in 2006 and 2005 - a dip from the 2004 total of \$24 million, which Campbell attributes to a slowdown in manufacturing.

Lott sees that manufacturing slump, with its high unemployment and excess capacity, as a positive sign.

"My response is, 'That's wonderful. I can employ it all,'" he said.

### **Buy Michigan First**

The Southwest Michigan Technical Assistance Center will sponsor "Buy Michigan First" at the Radisson Plaza Hotel March 13, 8 a.m. to noon, with local and state procurement representatives on site. Go to [ptacsofmichigan.org](http://ptacsofmichigan.org)

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