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This agency scored millions for the Springs, and did it for free

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Win millions in government contracts free!

It sounds like one of those late-night infomercial pitches. The Colorado Procurement Technical Assistance Center is the real deal, though. Local, state and federal government agencies really do spend millions — billions — of dollars in contracts with private businesses. And, during the past year, the PTAC, a new nonprofit agency based in Colorado Springs, has helped Colorado businesses land more than \$400 million of that money.

And, yes, it did it for free.

Despite having a name only a bureaucrat could love (which is sort of the point), unsticking the rolls of red tape that accompany government contracting is no task for the meek, and the PTAC's job is to help businesses navigate the maze and put themselves in the best position to win bids.

Government agencies are spending the money anyway, said Dave Csintyan, CEO of the Greater Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce. What the PTAC does is help Colorado businesses get their fair share.

“(The PTAC) is probably one of the biggest economic multipliers in our state right now,” Csintyan said. “Dollars are staying in our community rather than being outsourced.”

Until the PTAC opened last fall, Colorado was one of only a handful of states without an assistance center. PTACs are set up, and partially funded, by the Defense Logistics Agency, the Pentagon's procurement arm, but they help businesses with all forms of government contracting at local, state and federal levels.

That guidance can give businesses a serious shot in the arm.

“It moved us forward months in the process,” said Robin Visser, owner of Creative Touch Video in Littleton.

With commercial business down in recent years, Visser was hoping to move into creating educational videos for government agencies, but needed help identifying potential government clients and figuring out how to shine in responding to requests for proposals.

“It's hard to get feedback on a bid,” Visser said. “You can't look at other people's bids to see what you're doing right or wrong. (PTAC counselor Dennis Casey) was able to look at the bids before we sent them out and say, ‘Change this, work on this, this should be better.’ I think that made all the difference in the world.”

Visser won a contract to produce a Web video for a Georgia state agency and is waiting to hear on several other bids.

That story is what the assistance center is all about, said Tom Elam, director of the Colorado PTAC.

“We help translate from the government to the vendors,” he said.

The PTAC is an independent nonprofit that is funded through a mix of federal and state grants combined with local donations. It doesn't charge for its services and, although it's based in Colorado Springs, it works with companies throughout the state.

In its first year, the PTAC's staff of seven has worked with more than a 1,200 clients. Included in the \$400 million worth of contacts those clients won statewide was \$166 million in federal contracts for El Paso County businesses. Ken Knapp, deputy director of the PTAC, said the agency hopes to reach many more in its second year.

“There's a large number of businesses who have been sitting on the sideline,” he said. “They're fully qualified, but they're unaware (of the opportunities).”

Some of PTAC's clients are newcomers to government contracting, such as Sara Ridley, owner of Custom Welding in Palmer Lake, a steel-fabrication shop.

She used to specialize in custom products for high-end homes, but that market is in a slump so she's looking for work as a subcontractor on government jobs (she hasn't landed a contract yet).

“A small company like us, we can't afford a big-time lawyer to look at the contracts,” Ridley said. “PTAC does everything for free. It's a big plus for me — if I have any questions as far as certifications or how to do government contracts, PTAC has the answers.”

Other PTAC clients are pros at government contracting, but can still benefit from the extra help.

Pikes Peak Cargo Secure provides government agencies, primarily the military, with heavy-duty cargo straps, pallets and vehicle extraction straps. Even though 100 percent of its business is government contracting, Pikes Peak Cargo Secure was still missing opportunities before working with the PTAC, said Brad Brackel, the company's vice president for business development.

“Just recently we thought we were visible to the large defense contracting companies for partnering with,” Brackel said. “The PTAC looked it up and said, ‘No, this is the system these large companies go through to identify teaming partners.’ They said, ‘You guys need to be in this or they won't be able to work with you.’”

And, even for experienced contractors, navigating the red tape involved in government work requires all the help you can get, Brackel said.

“Doing government contracting, the amount of paperwork is obscene,” he said.

Some of PTAC's “secrets” are straightforward: Knowing what government Web sites are out there and how to sign up. Some of it is more esoteric, like knowing which agencies are in the market for what, or offering advice on how to write proposals and the best ways to make connections with procurement officers.

Another important role is connecting qualified subcontractors with prime contractors.

“We help them follow the money,” Knapp said.

This is not just a one-way street. Getting more qualified contractors into the pipeline helps the government by promoting competition and quality, Knapp said.

“They're spending taxpayer money and they want to see it spent wisely,” he said.

Having counselors with experience in contracting (half of the PTAC's counselors are ex-military, the other

half have experience in procurement in different capacities) is also a boon to purchasing offices, said Paul Aldrich, small-business specialist at Schriever Air Force Base.

Getting businesses pointed in the right direction and knowing the ropes makes the contracting process more efficient for everyone.

“They’re making my job a lot easier,” he said.

Call the writer at 636-0275

COLORADO PROCUREMENT TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

The PTAC is a nonprofit agency formed to help businesses find and win government contracting at local, state and federal levels. In its first year, the Colorado PTAC has worked with more than 1,000 clients and helped them land \$400 million in contracts. There is no charge for the PTAC’s services. For more information, go to coloradoptac.org or call 434-3470.

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