



ENTREPRENEUR READY COMMUNITY CERTIFICATION

A Program of the Texas Center for Rural Entrepreneurship

The Texas Center for Rural Entrepreneurship (TCRE) energizes rural entrepreneurs to start and grow economically successful businesses, creates entrepreneurial supportive communities within which businesses can flourish and provides value-added services to those assisting rural entrepreneurs. Entrepreneur Ready Community (ERC) certification is a results-oriented program that focuses on creating local systems supporting entrepreneurship and business development within a community-based economic development plan.

Critical resources to build entrepreneurial communities are discussed by experts in a variety of publications. Most conclude that three behaviors or activities are necessary:

1. The community possesses a critical mass of entrepreneurs who are actively engaged in capturing new market opportunities;
2. There is a group of entrepreneurs that comprise a distinct and recognizable community within a community;
3. The community as a whole is entrepreneurial. There is community recognition and support for entrepreneurs.

Certification is based primarily on community self assessments and documentation of support system development prepared by local representatives with guidance from TCRE. The applicant community should consider TCRE to be an active partner in their quest for certification so we can monitor the community's progress, make suggestions for improvements and expedite the certification review process. This does not mean that someone from TCRE needs to be present for all meetings and activities. However, TCRE stands ready to facilitate meetings, provide educational programs or suggest ways of accomplishing the steps based on previous experiences whenever possible.

The package, completed and submitted to TCRE for consideration, must illustrate how the ERC has prepared itself to embrace entrepreneurship as an economic development strategy. Criteria include possessing selected community characteristics, providing training and technical assistance, networking with support from outside the community, and supporting efforts of TCRE. Communities have the latitude to accomplish many of the steps in creative and innovative ways that might not be mentioned or used previously. However, use of some assessment tools will be required.

There is a certain amount of subjective judgment and flexibility in the certification process that allows for the uniqueness and differing goals of each community. Certification will occur after several consultations between community representatives and reviewers. It is suggested that the following steps and documentation be completed somewhat in the order listed.



Step 1 – Form Program Leadership Team

Objective: To create leadership and organizational structure to insure all management functions are accomplished and to challenge community residents to embrace entrepreneurship as a community and economic development strategy.

The Leadership Team (LT) will champion the initiative, help with program planning and insure accountability. The LT should include members that are representative of the *designated community (defined locally)* including municipalities, K-12 education, college/university, downtown development, minorities, city and county government, small business owners, financial services, faith-based, non-profits, and other entities that have a stake in the local strategy (agriculture, healthcare, SBDC, workforce, youth services, newspaper, etc.). Provide names and contact information for the LT to TCRE.

Resource: Leadership team signup/survey form

Step 2 – Provide program kickoff workshop for all interested participants in the community.

Objective: To build local interest and capacity to support entrepreneurs by providing an introductory entrepreneurship workshop to kick off the overall community effort.

The LT will organize and provide support for an entrepreneurship program kickoff workshop delivered by TCRE. A diverse group of citizens representing all facets of the community will be invited. The agenda will include topics such as understanding community and economic development basics, making the case for entrepreneurship as an economic development strategy, identifying and working with entrepreneurs, gathering the necessary resources, marketing your program, evaluating your progress and sharing success stories.

Resource: Workshop description and suggested agenda

Step 3 – Complete a Community Assessment Matrix (part of kickoff workshop)

Objective: To encourage project leaders and other interested program participants to assess and to discuss the current status of community and economic development in your community.

LT members and others attending the kickoff will complete a Community Assessment Matrix (CAM) and discuss the existing level of community and economic development. The CAM contains criteria that will help participants identify strengths and weaknesses to guide development of local systems to support entrepreneurs.

Resource: Community Assessment Matrix (CAM)



Step 4 - Community representatives complete Entrepreneur Ready Community Assessments.

Objective: To gauge the current level of community readiness and to formulate action plans to improve available systems to support local entrepreneurs.

Each member of the LT and a sample of entrepreneurs and other community representatives will complete Entrepreneur Ready Community Assessments (ERCA). The LT and/or TCRE will summarize results and report them to the community. Survey results will help the LT determine the current state of readiness and how they might begin to create more effective sustainable support for entrepreneurs.

The suggested number individual to complete an assessment:

Community of 20,000 or less	minimum of 35
Community of 20,000-50,000	minimum of 45
Community of over 50,000	minimum of 60

Resource: Entrepreneur Ready Community Assessment

Step 5 - Prepare a local entrepreneur needs assessment

Objective: To survey local entrepreneurs (start-up and existing) to determine the types of resources and technical assistance they currently need or required as they started or grew their businesses.

Results from this survey will be used to shape support system development. TCRE can facilitate this activity and prepare interviewers to collect responses from entrepreneurs, if necessary. Once entrepreneurs are selected for interviews, the LT will send a letter and business profile to each business owner, describing the initiative and asking for an interview. Interviews will be scheduled by phone calls and all individual company information will remain confidential.

The suggested number of entrepreneurs to interview:

Community of 20,000 or less	minimum of 35
Community of 20,000-50,000	minimum of 45
Community of over 50,000	minimum of 60

Interviews should be conducted face to face by members of the LT to insure completeness and accuracy of information. Face to face meetings will also begin to demonstrate local support for entrepreneurs. After results are compiled, copies of completed interview forms should be submitted to TCRE.

Resource: Entrepreneur Support Survey



Step 6 – Develop local entrepreneur networks or associations to help insure sustainability of local support efforts.

Objectives: To obtain feedback, to encourage peer to peer learning and to identify opportunities to provide technical assistance and educational programs

LT will encourage local entrepreneurs to create networks, associations or some other form of organization that brings everyone together to provide necessary assistance and information to individuals with business ventures. Entrepreneurs indicate that peer to peer learning is one of the most valuable tools for them to meet the challenges they face in planning and operating their businesses. Organizers also should consider separate gatherings for entrepreneurs with differing needs. For example, owners of start-up and growing businesses generally have needs or questions that differ considerably in scope and complexity.

Step 7 – Identify and catalog local resources, programs, organizations and people already supporting entrepreneurs and those wanting to increase their support of entrepreneurs while also identifying gaps in information and support.

Objective: To increase awareness among entrepreneurs of the necessary steps, challenges, applications and other preparatory tasks they are required to accomplish as they start or grow their businesses.

LT will identify and catalog the unique assets, characteristics, organizations and business clusters in their community that support and foster entrepreneurship and small business development. For example, clusters may include tourism, agriculture, historic features, location and geography, nature-based venues, and educational specialties. Support may come from local organizations, state and federal agencies, community colleges and universities, or business incubators.

One method of aggregating existing support both from within and from outside the community is to create a “How to Start a Business in (Your Community)” booklet, webpage, and/or other resources. One suggestion for accomplishing this objective is to create one or more Community Entrepreneurship Center(s) featuring local, TCRE and other resources. This may include gathering baseline data and creating systems for gathering and monitoring job growth, investment, and new businesses. The LT should document all efforts, such as press releases, business plan competitions, entrepreneur spotlights, youth entrepreneurship programs and recognition, capitalization seminars, presentations to civic organizations, and any other activities supporting entrepreneurs. Include updates in all news & media opportunities and meetings. Providing access to entrepreneurship curriculum (available from TCRE) directly supporting entrepreneurs with emerging and growth ventures may add value during this step.



Step 8 – Develop larger network of resource providers that can bring value to your community and its programs

Objective: To enhance relationships with regional, state and federal resource providers during educational sessions that help local leaders learn about sources of support for entrepreneurs.

The LT may invite a variety of resource providers that provide support required by entrepreneurs to present information about their organization and the services they provide. Invitees may include representatives from government agencies, Chambers of Commerce, SBDC, state and federal agencies, community colleges and universities, banks and other lending institutions, nonprofits, and any other individuals or organizations that support business development. Participants should spend their time sharing information about their products and/or services and how entrepreneurs can access their resources.

Step 9 – Identify alternative strategies for providing entrepreneurs access to capital

Objective: To network with a variety of capital sources and insure that business owners understand requisite planning processes to access necessary capital thereby insuring sustainable business development.

The LT will identify and develop working relationships with a variety of capital sources for everything from micro loans to larger investments necessary to start and grow business ventures in their community. It is common for several entities to participate in a blended capitalization strategy for entrepreneurial ventures. Finding capital sources both from within and from outside the local community will be critical to successful support for local entrepreneurs.

Step 10 – Provide Entrepreneur Guide workshop for everyone interested in a more defined in-depth role in the process of supporting local entrepreneurs.

Objective: To build local capacity to support entrepreneurs by providing an in-depth entrepreneurship and business development process workshop for local assistance providers.

The LT will organize and provide support for an entrepreneur guide workshop delivered by TCRE. Participants successfully completing this workshop will meet one of the requirements for the Entrepreneur Guide certification program. This is a hands-on workshop providing an appreciation for the venture development process and providing members of local support teams more comprehensive knowledge and practical experience with venture development. Workshop topics include business opportunities and ideas, feasibility analysis, business model and business plan development and analysis, capitalization and marketing strategies, using financial statements and others.

Resource: Workshop description and suggested agenda



Step 11 – Formally unveil local entrepreneur support system to community.

Objective: To implement processes and programs to develop local entrepreneurs.

The local entrepreneurship network will sponsor and present business development programs and will work directly with local entrepreneurs as they develop business ventures. Evaluations and documentation of all efforts will be included in review materials for certification.

Step 12 – Complete documentation of entrepreneur support cases

Objective: To insure the local support system is operational and capable of providing technical assistance and education to local entrepreneurs in a variety of situations and at various stages of the venture development process.

TCRE provides a short business profile form to document local entrepreneur support activities. The final application for certification should include a minimum of ten profiles demonstrating that the local support network is capable of interacting with entrepreneurs and providing the technical assistance and/or education necessary to move the business venture closer to reality or to reach its growth potential.

Resource: Report of Business Assistance

Step 13 – Final review and certification received

Objective: To complete the certification process.

The LT will submit all documentation to TCRE upon satisfactory completion of Steps 1-12. Following a review of the community application package, TCRE representatives will visit the LT to discuss current activities and make recommendations for possible new programs or strategies based on the community's unique opportunities.

Step 14 – Celebrate becoming an Entrepreneur Ready Community.

Receive the "Entrepreneur Ready Community" designation! The community may begin using the certification in marketing programs, business recruitment and other appropriate venues. A community celebration of this noteworthy achievement offers the LT an opportunity to explain the benefits and operations associated with it in press releases, feature stories and other media. A feature story and photos of each certified Entrepreneur Ready Community will be included on the TCRE web site.



Step 15 – Develop longer term action plans and broader support for entrepreneurship in Texas through TCRE and other organizations.

Objective: To insure sustainability by developing long term action plans and implementation schedules for local programs, by continued capacity building and by supporting TCRE and other organizations.

The certification process is expected to culminate in the development of a sustainable local entrepreneur support system that continues to offer opportunities for professional development, educational conferences and sharing of best practices. It is also expected to initiate participation in regional and statewide programs and support for institutions providing value back to the local entrepreneur support network.

For more information please contact:

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Current Program Cost (12/1/10): Total cost of the ERC program depends on the amount of time and travel incurred by TCRE to assist communities in meeting all criteria. The greater the amount of work completed by the leadership team and other citizens the lower the cost to the community. Every attempt will be made to incorporate existing successful entrepreneur support efforts into ERC certification.



Entrepreneur Ready Community Certification Checklist

Date Completed	Steps
	Contact TCRE expressing intent to apply for certification
	1 – Form a leadership team (LT)
	2 – Program kickoff workshop
	3 – Complete a Community Assessment Matrix (CAM)
	4 – Community representatives complete ERC assessments Summary report of ERC assessments reviewed by LT
	5 –Local entrepreneur needs assessment
	6 – Develop local entrepreneur networks or associations
	7 –Identify and catalog local resources, programs, organizations, etc.
	8 – Develop larger network of resource providers
	9 – Access to capital strategies identified
	10 – Provide Entrepreneur Guide workshop
	11 – Formally unveil local entrepreneur support system
	12 – Complete documentation of entrepreneur support cases
	13 – Final review and certification received
	14 – Celebrate becoming an Entrepreneur Ready Community
	15 – Develop longer term action plans and broader support