



ENTREPRENEUR READY COMMUNITY CERTIFICATION

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 prepared by local representatives with guidance from a TCRE Technical Assistance Provider (TAP). It is strongly suggested that the TAP be involved as much as possible in all steps listed below so he/she can monitor the community's progress, make suggestions for improvements and better represent the community during the certification review process. 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.

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

Step 1 – Objective: create leadership and organizational structure to insure all management functions are accomplished and to challenge community residents to embrace entrepreneurship as a community resources and economic development strategy.

Form a Leadership Team (LT) that will champion the initiative, help with program planning and insure accountability. The LT will identify local organization(s) & additional champion(s) to form a larger Entrepreneurship Support Network (ESN) to support the community in their entrepreneur and small business development strategy.



The LT and ESN should represent 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, Department of Labor, youth services, newspaper, etc.). Provide names and contact information for the LT and ESN committee members to the TAP and schedule a TAP presentation to both groups. This organizational step could be best accomplished with a one-day workshop organized around the Capturing the Entrepreneurial Energy in Your Community course which is included in the Rural Entrepreneur Support Network (RESN) curriculum available from the TCRE. An action plan to guide further deliberations and tasks may be a valuable product of this workshop.

Step 2 - Objective: Encourage project leadership to assess the current status of community readiness and develop an action plan to create systems for entrepreneur support.

LT members and the TAP individually will complete a Community Assessment Matrix (CAM) to assess the existing entrepreneur environment of the community. The CAM contains community and economic development criteria that will help participants identify strengths and weaknesses that may guide development of a system to support local entrepreneurs. Action plans may result from a conference committee meeting to prepare an overall group CAM which may serve as a baseline for evaluating progress.

Step 3. Objective: Encourage a cross section of the community to assess the current status of community readiness and develop an action plan to create systems for entrepreneur support.

Each member of the LT and ESN will complete an Entrepreneur Ready Community Assessment (ERCA). The TAP will facilitate compilation of completed ERCAs reporting results to the community in a town hall meeting. Summaries of profile responses likely will help focus discussions to determine the current state of readiness and how residents might wish to transform their community to create more effective sustainable support for entrepreneurs.

Step 4 - Objective: Increase community awareness of and support for strategies, needs and resources; educate the community about the benefits of developing “homegrown” business and fast-growth companies.

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 entrepreneur programs and recognition, capitalization seminars, presentations to civic organizations, and any other activities supporting entrepreneurs. Include updates in all



news & media opportunities and meetings. Send copies to the TAP so they can monitor activities and insure a solid case on behalf of the community during the certification process. Providing access to RESN courses directly supporting entrepreneurs with emerging and growth ventures may add value during this step.

Step 5 – Objective: Enhance relationships with regional, state and federal resource providers during educational sessions that help local leaders learn about sources of support for entrepreneurs.

Invite a variety of resource providers that may provide support required by entrepreneurs to present information about their organization and the services they provide. Invitees may include representatives from government officials, Chamber 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. Organizers should emphasize to speakers they are participating for the purpose of education, not sales.

Step 6 – Objective: Prepare a market study of local entrepreneurs and a study of local services available

Identify local entrepreneurs (potential, existing and growth): The TAP will facilitate this activity and will prepare interviewers to collect responses from entrepreneurs. Training will be conducted after the community has demonstrated sufficient activities in the first five steps above. Once entrepreneurs are selected for interviews, the LT will send a letter to each business owner, describing the initiative and asking for an interview.

The suggested number of entrepreneurs to interview:

Community of 20,000 or less	minimum of 25
Community of 20,000-50,000	minimum of 35
Community of over 50,000	minimum of 50

Interviews should be conducted face to face by members of the LT and/or the TAP. After results are compiled, copies of completed interview forms should be submitted to your TAP. Additional information adapted from business retention and expansion programs will be provided.

Identify local resources: The TAP will facilitate asset mapping and appreciative inquiry exercises for members of the LT and ESN. Exercises will help participants identify the unique assets, characteristics, and clusters of the community that support and foster entrepreneurship and small business. For example, attributes may include tourism, agriculture, historic features, location and geography, nature-based venues, and educational specialties.



Step 7 – Objective: Implement processes and programs to develop local entrepreneurs in order for them to create and grow business ventures.

The LT and ESN will work together to sponsor and present business development educational programs and will begin to work directly with local entrepreneurs as they strive to develop their business ventures. Evaluations and documentation of all efforts will be included in review materials for certification.

Step 8 – Objective: Complete the certification process.

The TAP will conduct a pre-review of all documented activities, recommending a review date upon satisfactory completion of Steps 1-6. The Review Team will visit the community to assess current activities and make recommendations for possible new programs or strategies based on your community's unique opportunities.

Step 9 – Objective: Obtain certification and celebrate successfully becoming an Entrepreneur Ready Community.

Receive the “Entrepreneur Ready” designation! The community may begin using the certification in marketing programs, business recruitment and other appropriate venues. It is entirely appropriate to organize a community celebration for this noteworthy achievement and to take the opportunity to explain the benefits and operations associated with it in press releases, feature stories and other media.

Step 10 – Objective: Develop longer term action plans and implementation schedules for local programs supporting local entrepreneurs and small businesses in addition to strategies for continued capacity building and support of regional and statewide programs and institutions.

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 ESN. Within 30 days of receiving the ER designation, the LT and ESN should host a strategic planning session that results in a longer-term action plan for continued local capacity building and strategies for support of regional and statewide programs and institutions.

For more information please contact:

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