



# unite ROCHESTER

**Solution: Networking and teaming up -- there's power in numbers**

Outside of struggles with financing, which most new businesses share, efforts to support minority-owned business focus heavily on networking, mentoring and pairing.

Teaming up is important as these small businesses build capacity and attempt to compete in a marketplace where the drive for efficiencies leads to bundling of contracts, a longstanding practice in which two or more contracts for goods and services are put into one, thus increasing the scale and scope of work required. It also helps companies just starting out when contracts require more experience.

"I hear a lot of our small businesses say, 'We have power in numbers,' " said Jessica Muratore, who until recently was director of the Urban League of Rochester's Small Business Teaming Program. "I don't know that a lot of them realize, if they work together, they could tackle a number of these issues."



Sitima Fowler, CEO of Capstone Inc., 252 Plymouth Ave., plans to serve on the board of a new networking group, DIAL. / SHAWN DOWD/staff photo-grapher

A new organization in Rochester is the Development of Indo-American Leaders, or DIAL.

Sitima Fowler, CEO of Capstone, an information technology company, joined and has been asked to serve on the board. Through DIAL, she has made business connections and started working with the Boys & Girls Club of Rochester. DIAL helps people in Rochester find leadership roles in the nonprofit sector.

"Organizations like that are so helpful because we don't come with any connections," she said. "People like to do business with people they know."

The Rochester Business Alliance does not have any specific programs, nor does it track women- and minority-owned businesses. Neither does the Small Business Council of Rochester.

"We've probably got some work to do on that," said Tim Mason, the council's board president.

Fowler has met other minority business owners through the National Minority Supplier Development Council, which connects minority-owned small businesses with large companies for contracts. There used to be an upstate branch, but it was not as active as the organization wanted, so now it is based out of New Jersey with a staffer here.

Capstone is certified as a minority-owned business with the minority supplier group, as well as with New York government to do work for state agencies. The group's certification is rigorous and continually monitored, and can be used to secure state status. Both are part of the efforts to safeguard against minority businesses being exploited, becoming pass-throughs or existing only on paper.

The other focus is on growing capacity through training programs, both in person and online, as well as focusing on strategic alliances and joint ventures to address the trend toward larger, bundled contracts. On the latter point, the group also draws in local corporations to its membership.

"We have made progress," said Lynda Ireland, president and CEO of the New York and New Jersey Minority Supplier Development Council.

When Fowler gets together with other minority business owners, she said the talk focuses on business.

"Everybody gets discriminated in some ways," she said. "We know it's not a level playing field, but we don't dwell on that. We just focus on growing our businesses and helping each other, helping each other network, making connections as much as we can."