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Women in business flex political muscle

New PAC aims to serve as an advocate in issues that affect female-owned companies in the state

By Carolyn Duffy Marsan *Star correspondent*

Forget about the "old boys network" and "backroom politics." Several local women are flexing their political muscles with the formation of the Indiana Women Business Owners Political Action Committee.

This group's executive committee includes five female chief executives in health care, technology and law, as well as consultants for the defense and construction industries. The new PAC will lobby state officials and legislators to raise the visibility of female-owned businesses and gain support to help them grow.

"The state of Indiana doesn't realize how much women-owned businesses are contributing to the economy," said Billie Dragoo, chair of the PAC and president of RepuCare, an Indianapolis medical staffing company with 130 employees and \$10 million in revenues. "I personally feel that women-owned businesses are replacing the manufacturing jobs that are leaving this state," she said. Indiana has 221,194 privately held businesses in which a woman is at least a half-owner, according to the local chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners. These companies are estimated to generate more than \$46 billion in revenue and employ 367,682 people.

These figures rank Indiana 18th in sales and 19th in employment for female-owned companies, compared with other states and Washington, D.C. The association says female-owned companies represent more than half -- 51.8 percent -- of all privately held businesses in Indiana.

The PAC "is going to be a phenomenal organization to keep the issues that affect women-owned businesses in front of the legislature and political leaders," said Jannett Keesling, president of the association's Indianapolis chapter and chief executive of Keys to Work, a company that helps women on welfare return to work. Keys to Work has seven employees and annual revenue of \$500,000. Female business owners are "a force to be reckoned with," she said.

The Indiana Women Business Owners PAC is bipartisan; its board consists of five Democrats, five Republicans and five independents. Its goal is to support issues that cut across party lines and affect all female-owned businesses.

"The PAC is forming to advance the agenda for women-owned businesses so we can grow and provide jobs for the state of Indiana," said Anne Sellers, managing principal of Sensory Technologies, an Indianapolis provider of videoconferencing systems that has 64 employees and annual revenue of \$20 million.

Other members of the PAC's executive committee are Sellers; Kay Fleming, a partner with the Ice Miller law firm; Stacey Smith, president and chief executive of Prairie Quest Consulting, a Fort Wayne-based defense consultant group; and Dottie Hancock, principal at Eaton & Hancock Associates, an Indianapolis consultancy for the construction industry.

"For years, the women leading this PAC have focused on growing their own businesses," Sellers said. "All of our businesses have gotten to the point where we have the luxury of giving back to the community."

The PAC will lobby to increase state and local government purchasing from businesses owned by women and to improve the availability of startup funding and bonding insurance to female-owned companies. Other issues of interest include affordable health care and educational opportunities for female owners.

"Most women-owned businesses are small businesses, and we are looking at some of the legislation and saying, 'This doesn't make sense,'" said Hancock. "That's why we formed the PAC: to give women-owned businesses a voice."

The PAC will rank candidates for statewide offices by how strongly they support female-owned businesses. As the PAC grows, it may endorse candidates and contribute to their campaigns, the group's leaders said.

"Our goal is that when a bill comes up that affects women-owned businesses or small businesses, legislators call us to find out how it will affect our group," Hancock said.

"Individually, these small-business owners wouldn't be able to have an influence on candidates or to lobby or to track what's going on in the legislature," said Margaret Ferguson, an associate professor of political science at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. "This collective activity is very important. . . . It makes it clear that their positions are widely held by other women-owned businesses."