

IMMPRENEUR The Immigrant Entrepreneur's Toolbox

Championing Immigrant Owned Small Businesses in New York City

BY FOULIS PEACOCK

New York has always been a beacon for people from different countries, and that's never been more true than today. Currently, six out of ten New Yorkers is either an immigrant or a child of first generation immigrants — roughly 37% of the population of the city — a number that has doubled since 1965. The last time New York City had that number of immigrants was at the turn of the 20th Century, back when immigrants from all over Europe poured into the country from Ellis Island and swelled the tenements and factories of New York City.

A New Commissioner with a Unique Focus

Recently we sat down with Maria Torres-Springer, the Commissioner of Small Business Services of New York City, whose job it is to make sure that immigrants and immigrant entrepreneurs have the best possible opportunity to succeed. Appointed by Mayor Bill de Blasio in January 2014, Torres-Springer was formerly EVP and Chief of Staff of the New York City Economic Development Corporation, where she oversaw more than 100 economic initiatives to support entrepreneurship in the city. Torres-Springer's parents were immigrants from the Philippines, which she believes gives her a unique perspective on the mission at SBS. "I have a firsthand sense of what it means to be a first generation immigrant," she says, adding that it motivates her to ensure that "our work is as effective as it can be in serving the immigrant population."

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Meet New York's Real Job Creators

According to Torres-Springer, today's immigrants are not only changing the demographics of New York, but are also driving the economy. Today, almost half the businesses in New York are owned by immigrants, and compared to native born New Yorkers, they are more than twice as likely to start a business.

Furthermore, with corporations contracting, these roughly 200,000 small businesses in New York are responsible for half of the private sector workforce, and so despite what some would have you believe, these small businesses – many owned by immigrants – are the real job creators in our economy.

Paving a Pathway to the Middleclass

Statistic such as these, paint a compelling image of immigrant entrepreneurship in New York, says Torres Springer. "What's just as important," she adds, "is that for many immigrants, entrepreneurship is, in many cases, the first chance at economic self-determination, and it's a real pathway to the middle class."

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The Mission of Small Business Services

Under Torres-Springer, the role of SBS is to celebrate all that's diverse and interesting about immigrant populations and immigrant small business owners, but importantly, to provide essential services.

The centerpiece of SBS program is the set of seven Business Solution Centers which are located throughout the five boroughs. These facilities deliver a full suite of services that help entrepreneurs find:

- Funding
- Skilled employees
- Guidance and Navigation through government regulations.

Additional Benefits for Businesses

1. The SBS's Business Acceleration Program assists entrepreneurs in opening a business in heavily regulated industries such as food services. The program provides a counselor for one-on-one mentoring to ensure efficient movement through inspections and government

regulations. According to Torres-Springer, Business Acceleration typically cuts down on the time required to open for business by three months. Originally piloted in food services, Business Acceleration will soon be available for retail and industrial businesses.

2. Similarly, SBS has a vibrant program to assist Minority and Women-owned Enterprises. MBWE's role is to ensure that these businesses not only get a fair share of the contracts awarded by the city, but also are able to grow in the process, thereby creating more jobs.

3. Most importantly, these services are provided in a variety of languages in one-to-one situations, increasing their effectiveness, and under the de Blasio administration, the number of business services offered in different languages has been doubled.

New Initiative's from SBS

The SBS has recently launched two important new initiatives.

Immigrant Business Initiative

- Provides solutions for the unique challenges of immigrant entrepreneurs: language barriers; cultural barriers; and mistrust of government brought from their home countries.
- Business Education
- One on One counseling for immigrant entrepreneurs
- Provides services in Russian, Korean, Chinese, Creole and Haitian, and are familiar with both communities and entrepreneurs

New York City Craft Entrepreneurship

- Works with unemployed or underemployed New Yorkers with craft skills. Designed to help build up existing skills, and gaining the skills build a business
- Clients taught how to sell crafts online for supplemental income
- Course currently in English and Spanish, but additional languages are coming

How do you get started?

"You can walk into a business solutions center, call 311 or go to our website at www.nyc.gov/sbs," says Torres-Springer. "And remember, it's free; all our services are free and that's very important to us."

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Torres-Springer stresses that whatever channel you come in, SBS will direct you to the person that's going to help you, regardless of where you are in the cycle of business development. For example, if you have an idea for a business, but don't know where to begin, they have courses like "Ten Steps to Starting Your Business." Or if your credit rating is keeping you from getting the loans you need, they have courses on "Improving Your Credit Score." And if you're already in business, but trying to take your company to the next level and to grow, SBS offers several good capacity building programs.

Next Steps for SBS

Ms. Torres-Springer makes a point about staying current with the needs of entrepreneurs, which are constantly changing, and that means staying in touch with the right people in immigrant communities. "Immigrant entrepreneurs are not a monolithic group," she says, "And we need to find a way to serve them that's not a cookie cutter approach. It's not just about language, but about cultural competency." To that end, Torres-Springer is focused on how the SBS staff is trained, how they communicate with clients in the community, and the languages they speak in the various Business Solutions Centers.

"It is very critical to this administration that we find ways to support immigrant entrepreneurs in ways that are creative, and are impactful," says Torres-Springer. "The mayor has charged us to make sure that every job seeker and every entrepreneur in this city, regardless of where they are from and what they look like, or language they speak, that they have access to the resources that enable them to succeed and thrive in New York."