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Q&A: How veterans can land federal contracts

The Small Business Development Center at the University of Houston was set up to help Texas firms grow. Through its Procurement Technical Assistance Center, it offers expertise in securing potentially lucrative government contracts.

"It's a very complex process, a lot of rules about contracting," said Bob Warren, a business consultant with PTAC. "We kind of help folks work the rules and appropriately submit proposals and get contracts."

For example, in January, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs began requiring registration with the Vendor Information Pages in order to do business as a veteran-owned company.

Warren spoke with the Chronicle's Hiba Adi about the registry and what set-aside programs are available exclusively to veterans. Following are excerpts from that interview, edited and condensed.

Q: The verification requirement is new?

A: The VIP has been around for a couple of years, but the requirement to be verified or do business as a veteran is fairly new. There was a U.S. Government Accountability Office study last year that showed that a lot of people are fraudulently claiming veteran status in order to be eligible for contracts, when they are not. So the VA has put emphasis on verifying that you are indeed a veteran if you claim to be.

Q: What advantages do veteran-operated businesses bring their customers?

A: A person who is a veteran has held a position of responsibility, and they have really put the interest of the country ahead of themselves. I think that goes into their business as well. They tend to be customer-oriented. They go the extra mile for their customers and they tend to be more responsible. Especially for younger veterans, they tend to be more mature in their delivery to clients.

Q: How can a veteran promote that status to customers?

A: One of the things we suggest is in all of their marketing material, business cards or literature, to put their veteran status on there. We're doing a lot of networking. That veteran-to-veteran networking is important as well.

Q: What types of businesses are particularly suited to veterans?

A: The federal set-asides ... especially through the VA, tend to focus on things like construction. The other one is services of some kind — usually consulting services, IT services - that allow you to perhaps leverage some of that military background you have. Anything that requires a lot of planning and organization. So we see a lot of veteran businesses in construction management business or project management consulting.

Q: Do veterans have a better success rate than other entrepreneurs?

A: Generally speaking the same rules that apply to any small businesses apply to veteran-owned businesses. Veteran-owned businesses tend to be in areas that have a lot of demand - construction, consulting services - so they're subject to the same kind of issues.

Q: What are some Houston-area resources for veterans?

A: There are lots of resources here. The Small Business Administration has a veteran advocate. The VA has an advocate here, too. There's a group called Lone Star Veterans Association. They have a community or network to assist veterans. The city of Houston has a veterans office primarily interested in providing preferences to veterans in city hiring, but also promoting veteran businesses in the city.

Q: Name an issue that is important to veterans right now.

A: I think the biggest thing is that the federal government does have a veterans' preference program to direct contracts to veterans. There are no particular programs that acknowledge veteran status for either the city of Houston or the state of Texas. Mayor Annise Parker announced that they are revising that entire process with the city, and we hope to see veterans ... in some kind of city preference.