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## How Small Business Accelerators Give a Boost to Black Entrepreneurs



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Cleveland-based AKA Construction Management Team tells how an accelerator positioned the company to make \$1 million in just two years

by [Alan Hughes](#) Posted: October 28, 2011



The AKA Construction team

When Ariane Kirkpatrick formed Cleveland-based [AKA Construction Management Team, Inc.](#) in 2009, her first piece of work was a \$6,000 contract to conduct post-construction cleaning for the Cleveland Museum of Art. But by taking advantage of economic development programs – in addition to a lot of hard work – her firm is poised to generate over \$1 million just two years later.

In its fourth year, the [Cleveland Minority Business Accelerator 2.5+](#) focuses on helping minority businesses connect with contractors and manufacturers with a concentration on healthcare, IT, manufacturing, construction and professional services. The accelerator created a virtual planning and estimating room and hired a professional estimator to help companies with their bids. Some 134 deals valued at \$131.6 million have been closed through the program since April 2008. Of these, 49 deals were closed with African American MBEs. This has resulted in more than 249 jobs created.

Through the program, Kirkpatrick learned how to get the proper certifications and was given networking opportunities through the accelerator's monthly breakfast meetings – one of which led to her first contract. "We've actually been awarded up to \$2.45 million of contracts this year," says Kirkpatrick. "Isn't it amazing? I mean, I pinch myself every day. I'm like, 'Is this for real?'"

The commission has about 100 corporate members who sign up in order to diversify their supply chain. "So that makes it easy for us because we now can go to those organizations and say, what opportunities do you have that you would like to be inclusive on?" says Andrew Jackson, senior vice president of the Greater Cleveland Partnership. "We want relevant work for minorities because we're not trying to sell you substandard products or services. We want minorities to be in the main stream and participate in significant supply activities."

The program consists of two components:

First, the staff works with large corporations to identify opportunities. Then they match the opportunities with the accelerator's database of registered MBEs. "We try to identify up to three MBEs who we think would satisfy the requirement for the client or the customer," says Jackson. "Based on that we have each of the MBEs come in and present to the accelerator staff and they do about a one hour presentation." The accelerator team then makes a recommendation as to which should compete for the contract. The Minority Business Accelerator team then analyzes the final companies to figure out their strength and weakness and identify a plan to address those weaknesses. "And that can range from executive coaching or whether they have the right processes in place to fill this opportunity or is their supply chain equipped to do what this customer is asking them to do," says Jackson. "We do everything to look at the deal to make sure that MBE is ready to go." For Kirkpatrick and AKA Construction Management, the program was invaluable. The CEO projects 2012 revenue to reach \$3 million, citing the roughly \$5 billion in construction under way in the Cleveland area. "The program introduced our company to opportunities that have definitely accelerated our growth and positioned us to be a sustainable company," she says. "Their support has been a direct reason for being invited to participate in several of the largest construction projects in Cleveland."

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