



Companies hurt by foreign competition can receive help

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Companies that have seen a dip in sales and employment because of foreign competition can tap into a federally-funded program to improve their competitiveness.

The Great Lakes Trade Adjustment Assistance Center was in Midland and northern Michigan this week to promote its matching grant program for companies impacted by imports.

The nonprofit group, run through the University of Michigan, can provide up to \$75,000 in matching funds for consultants who can help improve work flow, gain certifications, provide financial management, add sales teams, improve marketing and more.

"We're not a very well known source of free money," said John Antos, project manager with the center.

Improving awareness was a key reason the center attended a Midland Area Chamber of Commerce Issues & Answers session this week.

Each company that qualifies for the program receives a full assessment of the business in a written report, a confidential review of finances, recommendations to improve competitiveness and financial support for consultants, Antos said.

To qualify, companies must show they are directly affected by imports and have decreases in sales and employment of 5 percent or more. Antos said companies should contact the center to see if they qualify.

The center, which U-M has hosted since 1983, is currently helping more than 30 companies in Michigan and also serves Indiana and Ohio. The companies range in size from about six employees to more than 500.

Antos said 94 percent of the center's clients in the past five years are still in business. More than 75 percent of clients who lost money in 2009 turned around to profitability in 2010, and more than 50 percent increased employment in the same time period, Antos said.

The program uses federal funding and its leaders are aware that every program is being looked at in the federal budget as cuts are considered. Antos said the small amount of funding the program uses offers important resources for U.S. companies.

"We're optimistic that the budget discussion now will continue (our program) uninterrupted and fully funded," he said.

No companies in Midland County are using the center's services, but a map of current clients indicates there is one in Bay County. The center does not disclose its clients without their permission.

One company that did find success with the center was Grandville-based Enterprise Tool and Die, which builds sheet-metal stamping dies for the automotive industry and faced competition from low cost imports. Enterprise used assistance to upgrade its job management software, leading to more improvements throughout the company.

"Our bids are now very competitive, and we are able to maintain profitability" Doug Groom, Enterprise co-owner and CEO said in a news release. "We made it through a troubling time for our industry. Without a doubt, we will be around for a long time."

Scott Walker, CEO of the local economic development group Midland Tomorrow, said the trade adjustment program could be a good tool for some companies in Midland County.

"It fits well with our economic gardening strategies and helping companies with growth," Walker said.

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