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Leila Fecho, past president of the Connecticut chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners, holds up the preliminary results of its 2006 survey, as Patty Foley, NAWBO-CT treasurer, Carol Virostek, acting president of the American Association of University Women (CT chapter) and Barbara Potopowitz, public information officer for the Permanent Council on the Status of Women, look on. Most women in attendance wore red.

Small business concerns brought before legislature

By Carol Latter

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P Providing affordable health insurance for employees is one of the top two concerns of women business owners, second only to increasing sales, according to the preliminary findings of a survey released last week at the state Capitol.

The survey was brought to the legislature by the Connecticut chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO-CT), as part of a bid to encourage lawmakers to make Connecticut more business-friendly.

Leila Fecho, past president of NAWBO-CT, says the survey shows that providing affordable health insurance is identified by 51 percent of respondents as their most significant business challenge, and 79 percent said it was either “very important” or “critical.” Less than 5 percent said employee health insurance was not an important issue.

Increasing sales was named as the biggest challenge by 65 percent, while 42 percent said maintaining a profit margin was the most troublesome.

Fecho says the survey of women business owners has been conducted by NAWBO-CT in partnership with the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) for several years, and “the one consistent thing is that health care comes up as number two consistently. Health care ranks right up there with staying in business.”



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State Attorney General Dick Blumenthal, second from left, shares a laugh with other attendees at last week’s “Making Women Visible Day” at the state Capitol, when most women in attendance wore red. For the past few years, Blumenthal has been named an “honorary woman” by the day’s organizers for his support of equity.

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State Rep. Linda M. Gentile (left), state Rep. Sonny Googins (right) and Patricia Hendel, a commissioner of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women, listen to the proceedings at the “Making Women Visible Day,” held at the state Capitol last Thursday.

These and other concerns of women-led and small businesses were presented to legislators last week, during the 12th annual “Making Women Visible Day” at the Capitol. Fecho says while truly small businesses — including many women-led firms — account for most of Connecticut’s economic impetus, the state is not a particularly friendly place for them. NAWBO and other groups would like to see that addressed, through laws that support and encourage these small companies to do business in Connecticut.

As an example, Fecho points to Connecticut’s definition of “small businesses” — those eligible to benefit from the state’s set-aside program. The definition includes companies with revenues of \$10 million or less, but Fecho says that figure is not representative of most small businesses in Connecticut. Except for those in the construction industry, she notes, most have revenues that fall far below that

number, meaning larger “small” businesses have an advantage in competing for business from the state.

Research by the Micro Enterprise Resource Group (MERG) shows that of the businesses registered through the state, more than half (53 percent) fall within the standard definition of micro-enterprises (one to four employees). Fecho says a full 73 percent, meanwhile, have nine or fewer employees, “and that’s not including sole proprietorships or DBAs that are not required to register with the state.”

Among the attendees at the annual event were Helen Z. Pearl, founding mother of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (left) and Ruthe Boyea (right), for whom the Women’s Center at Central Connecticut State University was named.

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She says “having the state recognize that the \$10 million mark is a bit ridiculous for most small businesses” would be an important precursor to taking action benefiting the state’s smallest businesses — whether it’s supportive legislation, or set-asides for companies of that size.

“Making Women Visible Day,” organized by the PCSW in association with NAWBO-CT, MERG and the Connecticut Women’s Health Campaign, included speakers, panel discussions and seminars on issues of concern to women. But Fecho says a major goal was to “get information to our legislators and legislative leaders about what else they can do” to help truly small businesses.

“We hear our appointed and elected leaders talk about how small business is the driver of our economy, but the legislation that is actually passed sometimes doesn’t match up with their acknowledgement of the importance of these companies to the state,” she says.

“The state of Connecticut is not known for being very friendly to small businesses, and our legislators need to be reminded of this. What would it take for us to take our business to Massachusetts or New York or Rhode Island? If the state wants to retain small businesses and that economic engine, we want to make sure they know where we’re coming from.”