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DeKalb County UNITES to support small businesses

March 21, 2020 -- In the face of the unprecedented challenges presented by the coronavirus, a group of Northern Illinois University (NIU) and DeKalb County leaders have banded together to form DeKalb County University and Neighbors Investing Together for Economic Success, or **DeKalb County UNITES**. This grassroots movement focuses on helping small businesses remain viable during this period of mandated restrictions and economic uncertainty.

Cohen Barnes, owner of Sundog IT and Rena Cotsones, Associate VP of Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development at NIU, are co-chairing the initiative.

“As an anchor institution in the community, NIU has a deep commitment to ensuring the economic viability and quality of life in DeKalb County,” Cotsones said. “Small businesses are the heart of any community and they need help right now. Many are struggling to keep their employees

employed and paid. DeKalb County UNITES is developing strategies and moving to quick implementation to support them in these efforts.”

“Our immediate mission is to identify the ways we, as a County, can unite our residents, businesses and governments to make the largest impact on our local economy. Our business community employs our neighbors and family members, they support our schools and our non-profits, and they provide products and services that help define what a great County we live in,” said Barnes. “They are a vital part of the lifeblood we call DeKalb County, and they are in crisis right now and need all of us, no matter in how small a way, to do our part. The mission of DeKalb County UNITES is to accelerate that impact we all can make”

DeKalb County UNITES has formed action teams to address specific areas of challenge and opportunity for small business.

- A marketing/communications team is working to aggregate, amplify and add to the many excellent communications underway from area Chambers of Commerce, DeKalb County Economic Development Corporation, the DeKalb County Convention & Visitors Bureau, and many other area organizations.
- Local restaurateurs are looking at ways to help connect their capacities with the needs of the essential businesses that continue to operate. A local success story in this area is “Taking Care of Our Care Takers.” Melissa Butts and a group of friends organized a GoFundMe account to raise money to buy food from local restaurants to feed health care professionals on the front lines of the pandemic. DeKalb County UNITES will work with restaurateurs to emulate and create more of these kinds of win-win endeavors and keep restaurants afloat, restaurant workers employed and essential employees fed.

- Understanding the needs and capabilities of the larger small business community during this period will be an essential element of the work of DeKalb County UNITES. With an inventory of small business capabilities, an action team will reach out to larger businesses and institutions to determine how they might direct their purchasing power to smaller, more vulnerable businesses.
- While small businesses try to figure out how to move forward in this new environment, they continue to worry about their people, their payroll, cash flow, debt obligations, taxes and other elements of running their businesses. A financial resources action team will help small businesses navigate financial support that is available to them.

Like everything related to this pandemic, the work of DeKalb County UNITES is rapidly evolving. As needs become apparent in the community, the team will reassess and develop new strategies for helping small businesses.

“As a small business owner, I can tell you that there is a lot of value in just knowing that help is on the way, “ said Jim Doherty, owner of OLT Marketing and originator of the acronym for DeKalb County UNITES. “I am proud to be a member of this community and to see how everyone is coming together to help the small business sector.”

More information will be available online at www.dekalbcountyunites.com

