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OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

Rod R. Blagojevich – Governor

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GOVERNOR BLAGOJEVICH ANNOUNCES FOUNDING OF WESTERN ILLINOIS ENTREPRENEURSHIP NETWORK TO SPUR INNOVATION AND CREATE JOBS THROUGHOUT THE WEST CENTRAL REGION

SPRINGFIELD - Continuing to deliver on his *Opportunity Returns* promise to promote entrepreneurship and innovation in the West Central region, Governor Rod Blagojevich today announced the formation of the Western Illinois Entrepreneurship Center Network, which will oversee entrepreneurship centers in Macomb, Galesburg and Quincy. The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) and Western Illinois University are partnering to create and administer this new network. The Entrepreneurship Center Network will serve the western region of Illinois that includes Adams, Brown, Hancock, Henderson, Knox, McDonough, Pike, Schuyler and Warren Counties.

“Entrepreneurial activity has become the most important job growth engine of the national economy, and the guiding force behind the Western Illinois Entrepreneurship Center Network center is to capitalize on this growth by helping entrepreneurs succeed and create new jobs in Western Illinois. Together, through hard work and innovation, we’re building a more vibrant and prosperous economy,” Governor Blagojevich said.

All three entrepreneurship centers in the network are designed to act as new, regional hubs that will coordinate all small business development, entrepreneurship training and entrepreneurship development activity in the Western Illinois region, and will provide entrepreneurs with the tools they need to make their ventures successful. The centers will build on the existing infrastructure of the Small Business Development Center Network, the Illinois Technology Enterprise Center Network, and the Manufacturing Extension Center Network.

Its mission will be to look for small and medium size enterprises and provide targeted, accelerated services to those companies that have high growth potential. Staff will maintain a regular presence in all West Central region counties.

“Governor Blagojevich and I realize that the West Central region has tremendous economic growth potential. To fully realize this potential, it is critical that we do everything we possibly can to create a comprehensive support system for our entrepreneurs and small businesses. The Western Illinois Entrepreneurship Network will help ensure that there are no gaps in this support system and act as a vital resource in accomplishing our shared goal of creating quality jobs and fostering sustained economic growth,” State Senator John Sullivan (D-Rushville) said.

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The Macomb center is currently located in Seal Hall Room 211; however, the center will join the Macomb Area Economic Development Corporation (MAEDCO) and WIU's Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at their new location in the former PPC facility in Macomb. Sadiq Shah, Western's director of Technology Transfer, serves as director of the Macomb center, while Charles Bell is the Quincy center manager and Richard Johnson has been named manager of the Galesburg center.

Shah said the Entrepreneurship Center Network affords clients with consistency of service offered, as well as an enhanced set of resources. The Macomb center serves McDonough, Schuyler and Hancock Counties, while the Galesburg center covers Knox, Warren and Henderson Counties and Quincy services Adams, Brown and Pike Counties.

"A key to the success of the Entrepreneurship centers will be their ability to create new jobs regionally. By joining the resources of three centers, we are more able to achieve this goal than we would be by maintaining our separate outreach activities," said WIU Provost Joseph Rallo. "I am greatly pleased with the public-private partnerships which will make the Entrepreneurship center initiative successful."

Among the many specialized resources the entrepreneurship centers will offer is a financial award program to assist entrepreneurs or small businesses with obtaining professional services for comprehensive business plan assistance, evaluation of a proposed start up or expansion, or other accelerated support purposes. Award funding will be determined based on the potential for successful achievement of a significant business milestone for client firms. Maximum funding per award is up to \$5,000 of eligible project costs. Applicants are required to provide a cash match of 100% of the award amount. Applications will be awarded based on their display of project viability, growth potential, public purpose or other merit-based factors.

While each center will serve entrepreneurs and small business owners in its respective three-county area, the centers will capitalize on their core strengths to assist all clients in the nine-county service region. Though the centers in Galesburg and Quincy will each have its own advisory board, a management board with representatives from each center and service region has been established at the Macomb center to keep the services of each center consistent.

"The great advantage of this network will be in its capacity to pool resources and expertise in one unified effort to help entrepreneurs convert the wealth of technology research being generated in this region into market successes. The success of these entrepreneurs and other small firms will play an instrumental role in creating more wealth and economic opportunity in the West Central region," DCEO Director Jack Lavin said.

Governor Blagojevich's *Opportunity Returns* regional economic development plan is the most aggressive, comprehensive approach to creating jobs in Illinois' history. Since a one-size-fits-all approach to economic development just doesn't work, the Governor has divided the state into 10 regions – finding areas with common economic strengths and needs, and developing a plan with specific actions for each region. This grassroots effort is a product of significant outreach over several months throughout each region, with business, civic and labor leaders, and elected officials. The 45 specific projects that the Governor announced in January for the West Central region are designed to be flexible and effective. Each plan is tailored to deliver real results that local businesses will see, feel, and, hopefully, profit from.

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