

Belonger Corporation, Inc.

Belonger Corporation, Inc., located in West Bend, was started by Jean Marie Thiel in March of 2000. Belonger is the only American Indian Woman owned mechanical, plumbing and waste water contracting firm in the state of Wisconsin. Belonger Corporation is a complete mechanical, plumbing and waste water contractor in the specialty trades service industry providing H.V.A.C./R commercial & industrial applications. They provide mechanical retrofits, remodeling, trouble shooting, design-build and preventative maintenance programs. They also offer construction management, general construction and diversified services to the federal market customers.



There were many economic, social, race and gender obstacles for Belonger to overcome. The industry and economy was not a favorable one when the business was started. They were not allowed "COD" accounts and some vendors refused to sell to them even on a cash basis. Now they have over 100 vendors with open account credit. Bonding was not allowed in the first years where now they have no aggregate limit. They could not secure steady income or health insurance but now maintain some basic coverage. Since no one knew who Belonger Corporation was, the forecast of failure was based upon bias and stereotypes, assumptions based upon the owner's personal characteristics solely.

SBA has been able to help the Belonger Corporation in several ways. They became an SBA 8(a) client in December of 2000. All their bonding is in an SBA Bonding Program; financing needs were accomplished through an SBA 7a guaranteed loan for \$1.5 million; the SBA district office provided them CCR, FAR compliance and procurement assistance as well as marketing development and business seminars. The Wisconsin SBA office reviewed their 8(a) application, assisted them with their Joint Venture developments as well as supporting and developing their Mentor Protégé Agreement – the first SBA recognized MP in the history of the State of Wisconsin. As Belonger's capacity increased and their services expanded into other industry sectors, the utilization of the SBA programs facilitated Belonger's end goal of greater capacity and more capability.

Belonger takes on complex and high-end projects and offers turnkey services, often operating as a Prime Contractor or General Contractor as well. They installed the second thermal loop system in the state of Wisconsin and more recently completed the plumbing work at the Harley Davidson Museum project in Milwaukee, WI. This past year, Belonger completed a multimillion dollar infrastructure renovation with AFMOA at Goodfellow Air Force Base, TX. This project consisted of complete infrastructure and life safety upgrades while maintaining operational command mission and tenant occupancy throughout the duration of the design build project. Notwithstanding Belonger's federal focus, they have taken steps to secure private sector work as well. Currently, they are the design build mechanical contractor for Bechtel Power Corporation at the Oak Creek power plant in Wisconsin.

Belonger gives back to the community in the form of personal time and monetary support. They have provided answers, email, home support and ownership counseling support to four different minority owned firms. From one-on-one support regarding certifications, federal contracting to advice on start-up concerns, bonding, and opportunities available for small loans. Belonger serves as a board member to several local area organizations and various subcommittees and advisory panels that address issues that impact small businesses, minority and women owned business both on the state and federal level. They are a board member on the joint apprenticeship committee providing guidance to new construction apprentices throughout the state.

Belonger has participated in several round tables with the Milwaukee County Disadvantage Business Enterprise fair discussion panel as a minority and woman owned construction company. While striving to be competitive in the construction industry, Belonger has made a point of giving back. They annually sponsor, and provide, monetary support to the American Indian Chamber of Commerce Wisconsin scholarship fund, the dream team – a local

organization which provides inner city youth an opportunity to tour and attend colleges annually, the Multiple Sclerosis society, local women's shelters, First Harvest food pantry, and Boys and Girls Scouts of America.

Belonger has received various achievements/awards. In 2005, Jean won SBA's National Outstanding Woman of the Year; along with SBA's Wisconsin and Region V Minority Small Business Person of the Year award and was one of the Women of Influence named by the Business Journal. In 2004, they were selected as the Wisconsin Minority business of the Year during MED week; received the "Future 50" award from the Milwaukee Metropolitan Area Commerce (MMAC), won the BECI Trail Blazer Award and was the first government approved mentor-protégé in the State of Wisconsin. In 2003, they received the "Future 50" award from MMAC and the Entrepreneurial award from the Washington Chamber of Commerce. Belonger Corporation has been recognized by the AICCW – American Indian Chamber of Commerce – as the 2005 Business of the Year and more recently recognized by the State of Wisconsin Department of Commerce as the Outstanding Minority Business of the year. These accolades for business excellence are a positive reinforcement that SBA business programs, that Belonger utilized to achieve their success, do create sustainable and profitable businesses. Small business can thrive in today's economy by utilizing SBA programs.

When Belonger started the business there were three owner-operators, one full-time and two part-time. In addition, in the beginning, Belonger employed in one county in Wisconsin and by 2004, their employee base involved eleven different states and one foreign country. They have provided employment to minorities, women, and veterans on a consistent level. Currently they have twenty-one full-time and two part-time employees. So far, in fiscal year 2009, Belonger has been awarded over \$9 million in contracts. They have also requested bonding under the Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Recently, Belonger was invited to Washington, DC to participate in President Obama's small business roundtable in March of 2009. The roundtable discussion reinforced the need for SBA programs to continue to receive support from this administration. Jean Thiel, President of Belonger Corporation, who attended the roundtable, took encouragement from President Obama's remarks on the importance of small business fueling the nation's economic growth as he cited examples such as Hewlett-Packard starting in a garage. Belonger also had humble beginnings.

As evidenced above, Belonger has had to overcome some monumental obstacles to build their business and have it become a success. The SBA is extremely proud for the help it has been able to offer this business to overcome some of those obstacles and become the successful business they are. This business is an example to prospective small business entrepreneurs that they can also own their own businesses despite presumably insurmountable obstacles.