

State of Alaska
Department of Commerce,
Community & Economic Development



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

No. 18-010

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Partnership Between State and Anchorage-Based Small Business Delivers Vital Service to Rural Alaska

March 2, 2018 ANCHORAGE – With dwindling government budgets, collaborations between service providers take on a newfound importance. One such important relationship is between the Alaska Division of Community and Regional Affairs (DCRA) and Turnagain Press, affectionately known to their clients as the “QuickBooks Ladies,” to provide assistance to hundreds of Alaska communities.

“We are building a stronger Alaska by empowering municipalities and tribes with the tools they need to strengthen their financial management,” said John Nickels, the Rural Utility Business Advisor (RUBA) program manager, “Every town needs accounting software. You can’t get a grant, receive community assistance, or file your taxes without accurate recordkeeping.” The RUBA program, housed within DCRA and funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in partnership with the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, helps rural communities manage their water/wastewater utilities. If a community has a utility, it needs to track costs, bill customers, pay employees, and reconcile accounts. Since most utilities in rural Alaska are owned or operated by villages or cities, the accounting software is also used by the local government.

Joanna Knapp and Pati Crofut are the partners at the heart of Turnagain Press, a small entrepreneurship in Anchorage. DCRA has worked with Turnagain Press for 11 years—installing accounting software and providing training in countless rural city and village offices.

“We used to be able to go into a community for a full week of initial setup and training, and provide two follow-up onsite trainings of a week each,” said Crofut. Despite the cutbacks, with assistance from DCRA local government specialists, approximately 15 communities per year receive onsite service and hundreds of communities receive training necessary for strong local government financial management. Communities can also call a telephone helpline that is staffed three days a week to get answers to questions ranging from help preparing year-end tax reports to questions on payroll, account reconciliations, and correcting utility customer billings. In January 2018 alone, 122 community calls to the helpline were answered.

Nickels added, “These two ladies have literally written the manuals.” *Becoming a QuickBooks Power User* and *QuickBooks for Sanitation Utilities* are how-to manuals that incorporate a standardized chart of accounts provided by RUBA; describe how to create budgets, set up payroll and billing, and provide accurate financial reports; and promote government accounting best practices that help villages and cities increase their overall financial management capacity. While other QuickBooks classes are usually oriented toward private enterprise,

this training has been streamlined to make it relevant to Alaska’s rural communities, using customized, relevant practice sets to reinforce the specific situations in rural Alaska.

“My first trip to Chignik Lake was with Joanna,” said Casey Dschaak, a local government specialist in DCRA’s Dillingham office. “We showed up, pulled out all the old bank statements, and started reconciling them; she worked until 10 or 11 each night. She also taught the administrator and administrative assistant how to do their own payroll taxes rather than paying a fee to the bank to do it. That two-day trip will end up saving the community between \$4,000 and \$6,000 in fees annually.”

The partners also advocate for their rural Alaska clients. When QuickBooks announced it would no longer publish tax tables on disks, rural Alaska communities with limited internet access would have been left unable to use the software to calculate and report payroll taxes. After the team reached out to the corporate headquarters, the company capitulated, offering the disks to customers by request, and ensuring rural Alaska communities could continue to use the accounting software as the basis of their financial management systems.

Housed within Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development (DCCED), the Division of Community and Regional Affairs advises and assists local governments. DCCED is tasked with promoting a healthy economy, supporting strong communities, and protecting consumers in Alaska. For information about the Division of Community and Regional Affairs, visit commerce.alaska.gov/web/dcra. For information about DCCED and its other agencies, visit commerce.alaska.gov.

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ATTACHED: photo of the “QuickBooks Ladies,” Joanna Knapp and Pati Crofut

