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Employers get free advice via hot line

S.B. COUNTY: Human resources counselors will help with the state's employment laws and other topics.

San Bernardino County is reaching out to some of its thousands of small businesses by providing free access to human resources experts, officials announced Tuesday.

Supervisor Gary Ovitt said the San Bernardino Business Network will give small businesses a place to go to get answers. The service will include a hot line that can connect business owners with experts in human resources regulations, along with a series of 15 free workshops on employment issues.

The program, which will run through 2011, will cost \$70,000 and will be paid for with federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act money and other grants received by the county's Workforce Investment Board. Counselors from the California Employers Association, a membership group, will be available to advise local entrepreneurs.

There are 60,000 small businesses in the county, and many owners do not have trained human resources managers on staff. Often they are tripped up by the state's complex employment laws, which can be expensive to navigate and devastating if they become problems that need lawyers to untangle or if the state levies fines.

"These operational issues are time-consuming but we hope we can bring stability to some employers," Ovitt said.

The program is designed to save employers money. Membership in the California Employers Association can cost \$1,000 a year or more, while much of these services are essentially being offered for free. County officials are counting on employers using the savings to concentrate on retaining employees and developing fresh business angles.

The hot line, 800-399-5331, is up and running from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.