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## Looking to create jobs close to home

By Erica Schlaikjer  
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Some minority entrepreneurs aim to balance growth with commitments to their communities.

Colby Smith, 49, and William Leggett, 61, started their debt-collection agency, Collectors Training Institute LLC, in 1995 with a mission of creating jobs in an underserved neighborhood.

Almost all of their employees have been black, most from the same ZIP code as the company's call center, in the old Sears Roebuck & Co. administration building in North Lawndale.

But the company's growth has been limited by the size of its locally owned clients, which included Great Lakes Consumer Services and the Community Bank of Lawndale.

In their search for bigger clients, the duo highlighted their commitment to the community in order to stand out from other collection agencies.

Their big break came with a contract from General Electric Co. in 1996. Since then, CTI has collected debts on behalf of Citibank, Resurgent Capital Services L.P. and Check 'n Go.

Over the past five years, CTI has quadrupled its staff to 140 and doubled revenue to \$5.8 million last year. Since its inception, it has collected more than \$150 million in debts.

"We've had offers to move downtown, but I think it would take away from our mission," Mr. Smith says. "We want to stay in urban areas where there's a need for jobs."

Next spring, CTI will move into a new building at 16th and Canal streets, bordering Chinatown and Pilsen. The company hopes the location will help it attract more multilingual and multicultural employees.

"We realize in order to grow and service national clientele, we need to be changing with demographic factors," says Rona Fourte, CTI's chief financial officer, referring to a client that needs to communicate with Asian constituents on the West Coast.

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