

Soldiers Offer Micro-Grants to Struggling Store Owners in Husseinia

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First Lt. Otis Ingram, a Colorado Springs, Colo., native, watches as a customer picks up his purchase of eggs at a shop in Husseinia Feb. 26. Ingram talked to the store owner about the micro-grant program designed to help business owners improve their shops. Photo by Pfc. April Campbell, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division Public Affairs.

HUSSEINIYA — As the door opened, the shop owner momentarily halted his conversation with the unexpected visitor to tend to the needs of a customer who walked into his dimly lit store, Feb. 26.

After the customer left the store with his purchases, the vendor proceeded to tell the visitor, 1st Lt. Otis Ingram, that he did not need monetary aid for his business, as it was doing well; the businessman did, however, inform Ingram of businesses a few blocks down that needed the micro-grants that were available.

Upon leaving his initial stop, Ingram, a Colorado Springs, Colo., native, who serves as the platoon leader for 3rd Platoon, Company B, 1st Combined Arms Battalion, 68th Armor Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Multi-National Division – Baghdad, went with his platoon to the area the shop owner directed them.

During their day-long venture, the Soldiers visited several small businesses in Husseinia to assess their needs for monetary aid in the form of U.S. Army and government of Iraq funded micro-grants.

“We know this operational area and the people in it, so we can find out who needs the money,” said Sgt. Luke Groeninger, a Colorado Springs, Colo., native, who serves as squad leader with 3rd Pltn., Co. B.

The micro-grants offered must be used to improve the business. They are a one-time grant designed to boost the business’ productivity. With the grants requested often being much smaller than the \$2,500 maximum amount – approximately \$400 – the Soldiers can offer the aid to several businesses in the area, said Ingram.

“We’re giving them a grant that [will] make their business better so that [the community] is more economically stable,” he explained.

The money requested can be used for a variety of purposes. The owners are frequently looking for money for small, low-cost improvements.

“All of [the ‘mom-and-pop’ corner shops] want new paint,” said Ingram. “They want new racks for their groceries. Sometimes, they want a new refrigerator. A lot of [the refrigerators here] are really old.”

During the mission, two shop owners the Soldiers visited applied for micro-grants on the spot.

“We helped them fill out the paperwork and submitted the request for approval,” Groeninger said.

Sometimes, store owners choose not to accept the help. They do so for a variety of reasons.

“Some of [the business owners] won’t take [the micro-grants] because they feel that they’re really not that poor – they’re really not that bad off,” said Ingram. “Their business is doing pretty [well], and they know hundreds of other businesses or people who have it way worse than they do.”

While unexpected, the refusal of some to accept the grants indicates the residents are proud of their hard work and want to be successful on their own. They are also using the program correctly.

“[It’s] kind of refreshing ... because you see people who are actually hoping that the help goes to those who need it,” Ingram added. “It’s also eye opening. You think everybody just wants a handout – and sometimes they don’t.”

Like the man at the first stop, those who do not want the grants often guide the Soldiers to those who do need them.

After they arrived at the stores they were told about at their first stop, Ingram and his Soldiers helped two different shop owners apply for the grant.