

CONNECTING OPPORTUNITY CREATING IMPACT

2025

ANNUAL REPORT



Navigating Change, Strengthening Community

The past year tested the nonprofit and small business ecosystem in ways few of us could have imagined. Economic uncertainty, shifting funding landscapes and ongoing disruptions created real challenges for organizations working every day to support entrepreneurs and small businesses across our region.

In the midst of that uncertainty, the New Economy Initiative (NEI) remained a steady and trusted presence. When conditions were unpredictable and information was constantly changing, NEI focused on what we do best: listening, convening and responding with clarity and purpose.

Throughout the year, we brought organizations together to share knowledge, solve problems and navigate complex issues collectively while reinforcing the strength of our network at a time when connection mattered more than ever. As challenges surfaced, we moved quickly to address them. One example is the launch of MI Small Business Helper, an online resource designed to help organizations better support the entrepreneurs they serve by providing timely, practical guidance.

Another is our Lunch and Learn series, which created space for nonprofit partners to come together around pressing topics that legal and financial considerations to real estate and emerging technologies. These sessions drew strong participation and reinforced the value of shared learning during moments of rapid change. This year also marked an important transition for NEI.



Wafa Dinaro
Executive Director,
New Economy Initiative

We are deeply grateful to Invest Detroit for their partnership and stewardship of the Network Office over the years. Their collaboration and commitment strengthen our work and laid important groundwork that continues to benefit the ecosystem. As the Network Office returns fully to NEI, we are energized by the opportunities that come with having one unified team working side by side, deepening collaboration and strengthening our collective impact.

Despite a year marked by instability, NEI remained focused on what matters most: supporting the organizations that support small businesses. This annual report reflects not only the work we accomplished together, but the resilience, creativity and collaboration that define this network.

We are grateful to our partners, funders and community for their continued trust and engagement. Together, we are building a stronger, more connected ecosystem that is prepared to meet challenges head-on and move forward with confidence.

Our Mission

NEI's mission is to grow an inclusive community of entrepreneurship in southeast Michigan that benefits all residents and strengthens the regional economy.


We do this by...



Advocating for inclusive entrepreneurship
by promoting underserved entrepreneurs' needs and galvanizing philanthropic and public funding to meet their needs.



Activating strategies, raising funds and awarding grants
to support a network of nonprofits providing capital, assistance and connections.



Working with partners to use data and lessons learned
to ensure the network is effective and to inform public sector leaders on the value of supporting underserved entrepreneurs.



Our Funders

The work of the New Economy Initiative is made possible by the generous support of collaborating local and national foundations.











2025 IMPACT NUMBERS

NEI continued to support a network of organizations that help small businesses and entrepreneurs launch, grow and scale across southeast Michigan.

In 2025, NEI grants provided on-the-ground assistance to 8,821 business owners. These investments build on more than a decade of work to strengthen a resilient small business ecosystem in southeast Michigan.



\$3.45M

IN GRANTS IN 2025



30

GRANTS AWARDED
IN 2025



46,798

COMPANIES ASSISTED
SINCE 2009



8,821

COMPANIES
SUPPORTED IN 2025



GRANTS
SINCE 2009
\$151.5M

NEI 2025 WORKTABLE



JANUARY WORKTABLE KICKOFF



19 BI-WEEKLY ZOOM CALLS SHARING UPDATES, EVENTS AND RESOURCES



4 LUNCH & LEARN CONVENINGS



8 ACTION GROUPS



2 CHILDCARE BUSINESS SUPPORT TOWNHALLS



7+ SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS SUMMIT CONVENINGS

STRENGTHENING COLLABORATION AND ADVANCING SOLUTIONS

For more than nine years, the NEI Worktable has brought together NEI grantees and other business-serving organizations to build shared understanding of the small business support landscape and strengthen collaboration across the region. In 2025, the Worktable continued to serve as a central forum for learning, coordination and collective problem-solving, helping ensure entrepreneurs can access more connected, responsive support. This work included both regular convenings and partnerships that extended learning and resources beyond the table.

ADVANCING PLACE-BASED SUPPORT

The Southwest Detroit + Latinx Collective continued its work supporting Spanish-speaking entrepreneurs through coordinated services, monthly gatherings and contributions to the annual Latinx in Tech celebration during Hispanic Heritage Month. The group remained focused on responding to community-identified needs while strengthening relationships among Latino service providers and connecting entrepreneurs to relevant business support organizations.

PROMOTING LANGUAGE JUSTICE AND ACCESSIBILITY

The Language Justice and Accessibility Action Group advanced efforts to ensure that language is recognized as fundamental to economic participation. In 2025, the group continued to share resources and best practices that help organizations improve accessibility, enhance communication effectiveness and better serve entrepreneurs in multiple languages. This work informed how business support organizations engage entrepreneurs and deliver services more effectively.

ADDRESSING PROCUREMENT AND SUPPLY CHAIN CHALLENGES

The Procurement and Supply Chain Action Group focused on the barriers small businesses face in accessing contracts and reliable goods and services. It explored opportunities for local sourcing, collaboration and shared purchasing, to help businesses pursue public and private contracts and better understand how to navigate procurement opportunities.

SUPPORTING INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC BUSINESS NEEDS

Industry-focused Action Groups convened business owners and support organizations to address the unique needs of specific sectors. A childcare-focused convening, supported by a JPMorgan Chase grant, explored how the network can better support home-based and center-based providers. These groups officially formed the Beauty and Barber Association of Detroit to create a community among stylists, barbers and shop owners while connecting participants to relevant business support resources and peer learning opportunities.

STRENGTHENING COMMERCIAL CORRIDORS

The Commercial Corridor Resiliency Coalition aligned economic development partners — including the City of Detroit, Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, Michigan Economic Development Corporation, Downtown Detroit Partnership and Invest Detroit — around shared strategies for neighborhood commercial corridors. Work continued across five pillars: developer and landlord support, tenant and small business support, regulatory reform, placemaking and attraction. In parallel, the Business Association Consortium created space for business associations, placemaking organizations, community development organizations and residents to share best practices and tools fostering thriving commercial corridors.

BUILDING TOOLS AND SHARED RESOURCES

The Worktable also supported collaboration with the Detroit Neighborhood Entrepreneurs Project by extending programming and technical assistance to trusted connector sites across Detroit, helping bring resources directly into neighborhoods where entrepreneurs are already connected and supported.

These sessions complemented broader collaboration efforts, including partnerships with the Centrepolis Accelerator, trusted connector sites such as Live6 Alliance, Jefferson East, Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation, Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation and the Southwest Detroit Business Association, as well as collaborations with chambers and business associations — including the Inkster Chamber of Commerce, the Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce, the Arab American Women's Business Council and the Great Lakes Women's Business Council — to extend learning and resources across communities.

Through its Action Groups, learning opportunities and collaborative partnerships, the NEI Worktable continues to play a key role in strengthening the region's entrepreneurial support ecosystem and helping organizations work together more effectively in service of small businesses.

2025 NEI HIGHLIGHTS

JANUARY WORKTABLE KICKOFF

NEI kicked off its Worktable, a bi-weekly virtual and quarterly in-person series designed to strengthen collaboration among business support organizations. A total of 19 Worktable meetings took place in 2025, provided consistent opportunities for resource sharing, peer learning and alignment across Southeast Michigan's entrepreneurial support network.



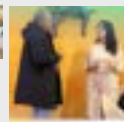
FEBRUARY CHILDCARE BUSINESS SUPPORT TOWN HALLS

The sessions connected providers, technical assistance partners and funders to discuss operational challenges and explore innovative ways to expand access to sustainable childcare options.



APRIL LUNCH & LEARN CONVENING: ACCESS TO CAPITAL

This session brought together nonprofit and small business leaders to explore strategies for improving access to capital. The discussion highlighted emerging funding tools and shared best practices for supporting entrepreneurs at all stages of growth.



MAY LUNCH & LEARN CONVENING: LEGAL BEST PRACTICES FOR NONPROFITS

NEI partnered with Miller Canfield for a session on best legal practices for nonprofits, providing practical guidance on governance, compliance, risk management, helping organizations strengthen internal systems and safeguard their missions.



JULY LUNCH & LEARN CONVENING: AI BEST PRACTICES FOR NONPROFITS

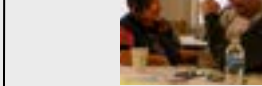
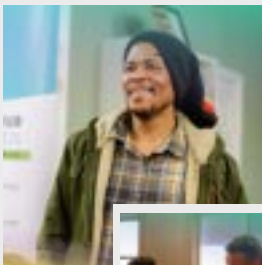
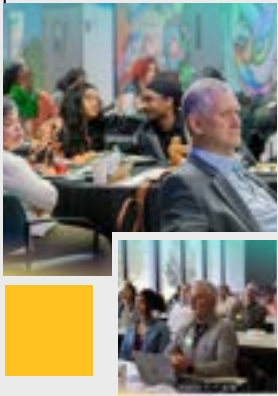
Experts shared insights on applying AI tools responsibly and effectively to enhance operations, communications and data-driven decision-making in the nonprofit sector.





AUGUST
MI SMALL BUSINESS
HELPER SOFT LAUNCH

This digital platform was created to enhance collaboration, resource coordination and service tracking among business support organizations working to advance small business growth in southeast Michigan.

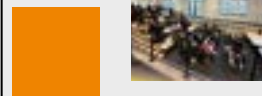


SEPTEMBER
SMALL BUSINESS
SOCIAL HOUR

NEI started a monthly Small Business Social Hour aimed at connecting business owners, business support organizations and founders. The monthly series travels to a different neighborhood each month in an effort to expose community members to various business districts.

OCTOBER
MI SMALL BUSINESS
HELPER LAUNCH &
GROWTH-STAGE
REPORT RELEASE

Two major milestones took place in October. NEI celebrated the launch of the MI Small Business Helper platform on October 7 — a new digital tool connecting entrepreneurs to trusted resources and support services. NEI and Detroit Future City released the Growth-Stage Businesses in the Detroit Region Report, providing data-driven insights into the needs and contributions of established local firms driving regional prosperity.



NOVEMBER
LUNCH & LEARN
CONVENING: SMALL
BUSINESS REAL ESTATE

NEI's final Lunch & Learn of the year explored small business real estate, offering entrepreneurs and support providers strategies for navigating property ownership, leasing and site selection, key factors in small business stability and neighborhood revitalization.



DECEMBER
BUSINESS SUPPORT
NETWORK OFFICE
TRANSITION

The Business Support Network Office officially transitioned back under NEI's management at the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan in December. This move reinforced NEI's leadership in aligning and elevating southeast Michigan's business support ecosystem heading into 2026.



BUSINESS SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS GRANTS

Business Support Organizations (BSOs) remain central to how NEI advances our mission to encourage, develop and grow entrepreneurship across Detroit and Wayne County. These on-the-ground partners deliver training, technical assistance, capital access and vital networks for entrepreneurs often overlooked by traditional systems. Through our BSO strategy, we extend resources into neighborhoods and emerging sectors, ensuring that support reflects local needs and lived experience.

“Through these partners, our grants do more than fund programs, they connect people, ideas and opportunity, sustaining an ecosystem where every entrepreneur has a clearer path from vision to viable success.”

— Wafa Dinaro, Executive Director, NEI

This past year, the NEI deepened this commitment through grants ranging from \$50,000 to \$200,000 via our Inclusive Small Business Support Network Fund. With more than \$3.4 million awarded to 30 organizations, these investments have empowered Mission Lenders, Technical Assistance Providers and Trusted Connectors that together reached thousands of microbusinesses.



OUR LONG-TERM PARTNER IMPACT

Investing In Partnerships

Design Core Detroit's Marketing Services Fund enabled small businesses to access creative services such as branding, visual design and content development; investments often beyond their reach but essential for attracting new customers and strengthening revenue. At the same time, Mission Lenders like ProsperUs Detroit and Michigan Women Forward paired with Trusted Connectors such as Live6 Alliance to create a seamless path for training to funding and expansion.

BUILD Institute

BUILD Institute, which concluded operations in 2025 after graduating more than 1,700 entrepreneurs. Its programs seeded countless microenterprises, generating millions in labor income and cultivating a robust business landscape. That legacy continues to shape our ecosystem today, forming a foundation on which our current partners continue to build.





CONVENING, ECOSYSTEM BUILDING, DATA COLLECTION AND ADVOCACY

CONVENING BRINGING THE ECOSYSTEM TOGETHER

Convening sits at the center of NEI’s work. While grantmaking remains an important function, its greatest value lies in bringing together the organizations, lenders and entrepreneurs that support small businesses across southeast Michigan.

In 2025, grantees and partners continued to come together through 19 bi-weekly virtual calls and convenings and quarterly in-person Worktable gatherings, focused on alignment, shared challenges and collaboration. These convenings created space for participants to better understand one another’s work and identify opportunities to strengthen coordination across the ecosystem.

A new Lunch and Learn series was introduced to help business support organizations build knowledge together. Sessions focused on timely and practical topics including AI for nonprofits, preparing entrepreneurs for access to capital and understanding legal and policy changes affecting the sector.

Small Business Social Hour, launched in partnership with City Institute and sponsored by Gilbert Family Foundation, convened entrepreneurs and created opportunities for peer-to-peer connection. These gatherings reflect the belief that entrepreneurs benefit from learning alongside others with shared experiences.

Focused actions groups also continued, including the Small Business Success Summit, a monthly forum where lenders and technical assistance providers come together to discuss real cases and identify ways to help entrepreneurs overcome barriers to accessing capital.

ECOSYSTEM BUILDING STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS FOR ENTREPRENEURS

NEI's convening work supports a broader commitment to ecosystem building, with the goal of making it easier for entrepreneurs to navigate available resources.

A key part of this effort is MI Small Business Helper, a centralized online platform developed in collaboration with ecosystem partners. The platform brings together information on programs, services and organizations that support entrepreneurs at different stages of their business journey.

Throughout 2025, NEI worked with partners to develop and refine content for the platform, drawing on their expertise to ensure information is accurate, relevant and useful. By organizing resources in one place, MI Small Business Helper helps reduce fragmentation and supports a more connected ecosystem.

Beyond digital tools, NEI's ecosystem building work includes identifying gaps, bringing the right partners together and supporting collaborative efforts to address shared challenges.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMING STRATEGY THROUGH INSIGHT

NEI's work is informed by data collected through grantmaking, partnerships and research. This information helps NEI and its partners better understand trends, challenges and opportunities across the small business ecosystem.

In 2025, NEI partnered with Detroit Future City to release *Growth Stage Businesses in the Detroit Region: Insights and Solutions to Fuel Economic Impact*. Based on focus groups and interviews conducted during the summer, the report highlights the role growth stage businesses play in the regional economy and examines challenges related to capital, business support networks, technology, talent and policy.

The research provides shared insight that helps inform ecosystem conversations and future strategies. In addition to formal reports, NEI's ongoing data collection supports learning across the network and helps identify where additional coordination or resources may be needed.

ADVOCACY SUPPORTING LONG-TERM POLICY CHANGE

Advocacy is a key component of NEI's work, focused on improving conditions for small and microbusinesses.

Through its leadership of the Michigan Microbusiness Coalition, NEI works with statewide partners to advance policy discussions related to microbusinesses. While progress takes time, this work reflects NEI's role in bringing partners together, sharing information and laying the groundwork for future policy change.

In 2025, NEI continued to support these efforts by maintaining partnerships and aligning advocacy with its broader ecosystem and data-driven work.



JUST ELEVATE FITNESS CLUB

TURNING PASSION INTO PURPOSE

For Detroit native Jordan Smith, the path to entrepreneurship began with a personal loss and a newfound sense of purpose. At 15, while exploring marketing in high school, he lost his grandmother to breast cancer.

“It woke me up,” he says. “I realized fitness wasn’t just about sports. It was about living a longer, healthier life and helping others avoid similar losses.”

That early clarity guided him through high school and into Michigan State University, where he pursued a marketing degree.

But the traditional corporate path never fit. Instead of internships and corporate roles, he channeled his energy into a personal passion: fitness.

At 19, he launched Nxt Level Fitness, a brand built around the idea that “fitness is more than a brand. It’s a mindset, a lifestyle, asking ourselves every day, what can we do to reach our next level.”

The journey began online, offering virtual coaching and workout plans. As the pandemic shifted how people accessed fitness, Jordan expanded into in-person training at local facilities.

“It was about refining each group of clients, growing my community and staying open to opportunities,” he recalls.

Over time, his entrepreneurial vision grew alongside his brand.

In April 2025, Jordan took possession of his first brick and mortar space in Detroit and transitioned the business into Just Elevate Fitness Club. The rebrand reflected a philosophy of continual growth.

“When you reach your next level, you ask yourself, now what? The answer is just elevate.”

By July, the space was fully built out and ready to welcome the community.

Critical to that success were partnerships and resources provided by local organizations including TechTown Detroit, Michigan Black Business Alliance, Black Leaders Detroit, ProsperUS Detroit and Motor City Match. Jordan also contributed to NEI’s MI Small Business Helper platform, suggesting a consolidated list of active grants to make funding easier for entrepreneurs.

“It’s now a core part of the platform, giving people access to resources without needing to connect with multiple organizations,” he says.

Now, months into operating Just Elevate, he is focused on growth, creativity and retention.

“We’ve learned what works, what classes people love and how to engage our community. Our goal is to scale thoughtfully while showing gratitude to those who have supported us from the start.”

For other Detroit entrepreneurs just starting their journey, his advice is simple: “Don’t wait. Take that first step. Plant the seeds, water them and tend to them. Success comes from showing up every day and committing to growth.”

Through personal loss, self-discovery and the support of local organizations, Jordan Smith has transformed a passion into a thriving business, proving that purpose, perseverance and community can elevate not just fitness but life itself.



DEARBORN BALLOONS



DEARBORN TEEN ENTREPRENEUR TURNS BALLOONS, FLORALS AND DESSERTS INTO A COMMUNITY-FOCUSED BUSINESS

When Dearborn high school student Amira Abuhmoud couldn't find décor for events that matched her vision, she decided to create it herself. At 17, she launched Dearborn Balloon Decor, transforming a hobby into a small business serving schools, neighborhoods and citywide events.

Today, at 19, Amira balances a full college course load with running a fast-growing company that now offers coordinated balloon décor, floral design and custom desserts for events.

"Running a growing business while balancing a full college course load pushed me to develop strong time management, leadership and problem-solving skills and taught me to stay calm when things don't go as planned," said Abuhmoud.

After early word-of-mouth projects for teachers at her school went viral, her social media following quickly grew into regular bookings. She now completes about 15 events a month, plus pop-ups, with most business coming through Instagram and referrals.

Deeply rooted in her community, Amira began by creating graduation arches, prom and homecoming décor for Dearborn Public Schools and offering discounted rates and donated work for school-based events and food drives. Her reputation for high-impact designs led to city partnerships, including décor for the City of Dearborn's inauguration and the mayor's campaign after-party. She continues to run the business with support from her mother, emphasizing giving back as central to her brand.

Abuhmoud continued, “Dearborn Balloon Decor represents more than a business to me. It reflects my ability to turn ideas into something that makes a lasting impact in my community.”

In 2025, that commitment paid off. Amira was honored with the Arab American Women’s Business Council (AAWBC) Community Impact Award during the organization’s Small Business Evolution pitch competition. AAWBC, a grantee of NEI, connects Arab American women-owned businesses to vital resources and support that foster growth and visibility.

That same year, Amira also received a Dedicated Service Award from the Dearborn PTA Council, recognizing her ongoing donations of décor, discounted school rates and support for student-centered events across the district.

“Winning the Community Impact Award showed me that people really see and appreciate what I’m doing and it motivates me to keep growing my business so I can give even more back to the community,” said Abuhmoud.

A sophomore honors biology major at University of Detroit Mercy and pre-dental student, Amira manages scheduling events Friday through Sunday, reserving Mondays for breakdowns and preparation. Looking ahead, her goal is to open a storefront within the next year that offers retail balloons and decor services, while continuing custom events and eventually hiring staff from the community she’s determined to uplift.



CAFÉ CLARK



BRINGING COFFEE AND COMMUNITY TO SOUTHWEST DETROIT

Café Clark began with a question. For Eduardo and Melisa, both lifelong residents of Southwest Detroit, that question was simple but persistent: why, in a neighborhood that is rich with history, culture and growing investment, was there no dedicated café where people could gather, connect and feel at home?

“It’s one of those things where you realize, we need a space here that’s more than just a coffee shop. It’s a place for the community. Thankfully we have had that with more recent third spaces opening up, such as Vamonos and The Grand Porter, but this neighborhood can always have more and deserves more,” said Eduardo.



The idea for Café Clark traces back to the challenges and opportunities of 2020. Eduardo, whose background was in consulting and e-commerce, had been working at a tech company when the pandemic hit.

“Bonuses were cut, raises were cut, salaries were cut and I found myself thinking, what can I control, build and grow?” he recalled.

Around the same time, Eduardo and a friend were brainstorming their next business venture. They wanted something tangible, a product people could touch, feel and experience. That’s when coffee entered the picture.

Eduardo’s interest in coffee was rooted in his college experience at the University of Michigan.

“That’s how I first started learning about coffee,” he said.

Years later, he and his friend began experimenting with selling coffee through e-commerce, eventually sourcing beans directly from farmers in Guatemala, Mexico and other regions. Eduardo focused on selling in Detroit, while also providing consulting services, helping businesses build out their business models, projections and ultimately connecting with more people in the hospitality industry.

Melisa, meanwhile, had been deeply involved in managing Plaza Mexico, her family’s small Mexican restaurant in east Detroit that they had been running for decades and celebrates their 25th anniversary this year.

“I was following the family business, but I never knew where it would take me,” she said.

The path from idea to reality was deliberate and data-driven. Eduardo built detailed revenue forecasts, analyzed neighborhood traffic patterns and researched every operational cost, from the ounces of milk used per drink to staffing needs.



Melisa contributed her expertise in food service and menu design, suggesting a simple rotating menu to complement the coffee and increase the average ticket size.

“Family support was a huge turning point for us,” Eduardo explained. “My mom said she would help with mornings, my dad offered to help with prep. While they may or may not as I recognize they’re getting older, it was that kind of immediate support which gave us confidence that we could take this on.”

Today, Café Clark is in the final stages of preparation with construction and equipment installations underway. The team is planning a soft open in Spring 2026, with a grand opening soon after.

The café will be located within La Joya Gardens, a mixed-use residential, retail and community project led by the Southwest Detroit Business Association (SDBA). Through funding from NEI, SDBA provided Eduardo and Melisa with guidance and connections to help align the café with broader neighborhood development goals. As a result of this collaboration, Café Clark will become more than just a business. It will serve as a true community hub.

“We’re combining our experiences, our love for this neighborhood and our entrepreneurial drive. Café Clark is about creating something that people here can call their own,” said Eduardo.

For Melisa, the excitement is personal as well as professional. “We grew up here, we’ve seen this neighborhood change and we wanted to contribute something meaningful. This café is our way of becoming a part of the growth and change in SW Detroit and building something that lasts.”

With the grand opening on the horizon, Café Clark promises to bring more than coffee to Southwest Detroit. It will bring a sense of place, connection and opportunity, serving as a testament to what happens when vision, hard work and community support come together.

FOR THE LOVE OF CHEESECAKE



FROM POP-UPS TO BRICK-AND-MORTAR, A DETROIT BAKER KEEPS BUILDING

For nearly a decade, For the Love of Cheesecake has grown one event at a time. Founded by Cortney Hamilton, aka “Mz. Cheesecake,” the Detroit business began as a passion project that slowly turned into a full-fledged operation that continues to expand.

“I started making cheesecakes out of pure joy. I would bake for family, friends and anyone who just loved good dessert,” Hamilton said.



Over time, that passion grew into purpose. Every festival, every late night in the kitchen, every lesson learned pushed her closer to building something lasting.

From the beginning, events were central to the company’s growth. Large gatherings such as Royal Oak’s Arts, Beats & Eats and Winter Blast, as well as Detroit’s NFL Draft and the Cadillac Square Holiday Market, introduced the brand to new customers and helped drive consistent revenue.

Hamilton also is in Eastern Market every Saturday, maintaining a regular presence that continues to build her customer base. Before opening her storefront, she said roughly 80 percent of her income came from events, supplemented by catering and online orders.

That model allowed the business to grow without the immediate pressure of maintaining a permanent location.

As the business expanded, Hamilton connected with a range of entrepreneurial programs supported by or aligned with NEI. Through the Black Business Alliance’s program, funded by the NEI, she accessed business education and resources and she was later selected as a finalist in Techtown Detroit’s Hatch Detroit small business contest. In 2025, she also received a Detroit Elevate grant for Best Booth Setup through a people’s choice award, recognizing the strength of her event presence and brand presentation.

A major milestone came through a Detroit-based Black business owners initiative that opened the door to Ford Field. After being invited to participate, Hamilton followed the process closely, completed a tasting and earned the opportunity to operate a concession stand.

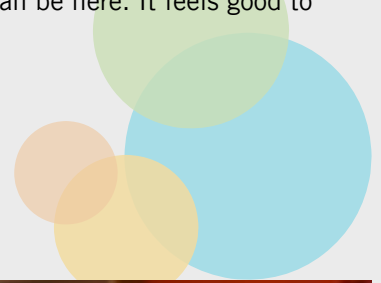
“I followed up all the way through the process,” she said.

“They did a tasting, they liked the cheesecake and they gave me a concession stand. I’ve been in there for three years now.”

In early 2025, Hamilton took her biggest step yet, purchasing a building at 18685 Livernois and opening her first brick-and-mortar location. Originally intended to function as a private commercial kitchen, the space evolved into a public-facing café. The business is currently operating in a soft-opening phase, with a full café launch planned for this summer.

Now fully committed to the storefront, Hamilton says the experience has reinforced how far the business has come.

“I never planned on having a store like this,” she said. “But now people are coming, the store is doing well and I’m realizing I can be here. It feels good to see it working.”



WOODWARD THROWBACKS



BUILDING A DETROIT DESIGN BUSINESS WITH CREATIVITY AND ECOSYSTEM SUPPORT

Woodward Throwbacks began as a hands-on passion project rooted in creativity, resourcefulness and a growing appreciation for Detroit’s built environment. Founded by Kyle Dubay and his partner, Bo Shepherd, the business officially took shape around 2014 after years of building furniture and décor from reclaimed materials salvaged throughout the city.

In its earliest days, the team worked out of a one-car garage near Brush Park, creating wooden signs, bottle openers and small furniture pieces using found wood from illegal dumping sites and renovation sites. Selling at Eastern Market helped validate the concept and introduce their work to a broader audience, while the use of reclaimed materials and storytelling set the brand apart.

As demand grew, Woodward Throwbacks reached a pivotal moment with support from Motor City Match, a program previously supported by the NEI to help Detroit entrepreneurs access capital and guidance for commercial space. A Round 1 participant, the business received critical financial support that allowed them to renovate their first small building on Michigan Avenue near Corktown. In addition, NEI provided support to Woodward Throwbacks through Design Core Detroit, further strengthening its growth and development.

“That really helped us get the project off the ground,” Dubay said. “At that time, it was potentially the difference between getting it done or not.”

Beyond funding, the application and planning process helped the business mature operationally. Preparing business plans, budgets and construction timelines gave the team tools they would continue to rely on as the company expanded.

“It makes you get your stuff together,” Dubai said. “It’s not just a handout. You have to put the work in and that helps you grow in the long run.”

From that space, Woodward Throwbacks transitioned into wholesale, selling products to boutiques across the country and securing placements with national retailers. As mass-produced alternatives entered the market, the business once again adapted, shifting its focus toward architectural salvage, bespoke furniture and custom design work.

That evolution led to the purchase of a much larger building in Hamtramck, which now serves as both a studio and a public-facing showroom. With increased space and a growing team, the business leaned into highly customized furniture and interior design projects that blend reclaimed and new materials, drawing on years of experience restoring old buildings.

“Now we’re booked months out, the team will likely grow and we’re expecting a big bump in revenue this year,” he said.

Today, Woodward Throwbacks operates with a team of eight to ten staff members and a network of collaborators, completing residential and commercial design projects across Michigan and beyond. After several challenging years in the home and design industry, the business is experiencing renewed momentum, with projects booked months in advance and plans to continue growing its team.

For Woodward Throwbacks, that progress reflects both creative persistence and the importance of support at key moments. Access to NEI-supported programs helped transform a small, self-taught operation into a sustainable Detroit-based design studio, one built to evolve alongside the city that inspired it.



MI SMALL BUSINESS HELPER



A major step forward was made in 2025 helping small businesses across southeast Michigan more easily find, understand and use the support available to them. In August, NEI launched MI Small Business Helper in partnership with Gilbert Family Foundation, backed by more than 90 regional organizations and SourceLink, the technology consultant behind the platform's design and implementation. The free digital platform connects entrepreneurs and founders to trusted local resources, guides and programs in one easy-to-use place.

Metro Detroit has long been a national model for collaborative small business support. The challenge has never been a lack of resources but rather knowing where to start. MI Small Business Helper simplifies that first step by helping entrepreneurs find the right help at the right time, especially those in under-served communities.

KEY FEATURES INCLUDE:

- A searchable directory of 90 plus support organizations offering no-cost and low-cost tools, funding, mentorship, training and regulatory guidance
- Step-by-step business guides for starting a business, opening a brick-and-mortar location or securing funding
- A curated calendar of trainings, pop-up retail opportunities, networking events and more
- A growing library of templates, guides and videos co-created with partners and organized by business need
- Up-to-date grant listings with eligibility criteria, funding details and deadlines
- Regulatory guidance on licenses, permits and land use across Detroit and Michigan

NEI built MI Small Business Helper with the community, not just for it. By working closely with dozens of entrepreneurs and business support organizations through interviews, workshops and pilot testing, the platform was shaped to reflect real-world needs at every stage of business growth.

With nearly one million small businesses employing almost two million residents statewide, the MI Small Business Helper is more than a tool. It is shared infrastructure that supports community-based economic growth and strengthens Michigan's small business ecosystem for years to come.

EXPLORE MI SMALL BUSINESS HELPER

Entrepreneurs can begin their growth journey today by visiting michigansmallbusinesshelper.com, where they will find the resources, guidance and connections needed to turn ideas into opportunity and opportunity into lasting success.

MI SMALL BUSINESS HELPER AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

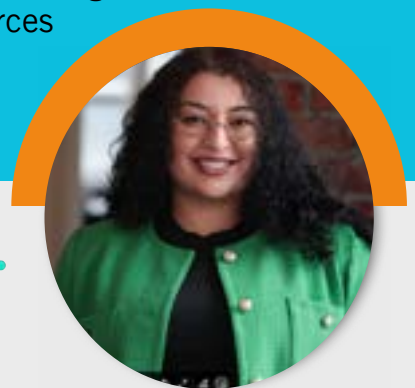
In 2025, NEI expanded its MI Small Business Helper Ambassador Program by enlisting trusted community leaders across southeast Michigan to guide entrepreneurs to the right resources. These ambassadors serve as on-the-ground connectors who promote the platform, help business owners understand what it offers and encourage participation.

- **Max Chapman | Chapman's Jewelry & Gifts**
Third-generation co-owner of a legacy Detroit jewelry business, Max Chapman represents the strength and adaptability of long-standing neighborhood enterprises.
- **Ebony Cochran | The Debt Survivor & Detroit Wealth Club**
A financial empowerment advocate and entrepreneur, Ebony Cochran helps individuals and small businesses build credit, wealth and long-term stability.
- **Hania Manouzi | Bolt Detroit**
Founder of Bolt Detroit, Hania Manouzi supports small businesses through digital marketing and web design that strengthens visibility and growth.

- **CJ Jones | CJ's Clippers**
A Detroit barber and small business owner, CJ Jones provides essential services while fostering trust and connection within his community.
- **Jennyfer Crawford-Williams | All Things Marketplace & All Things Detroit**
Founder of All Things Marketplace, Jennyfer Crawford-Williams creates platforms that elevate small businesses, makers and Detroit-based entrepreneurs.
- **Mounira Zahr | MMM Cleaning Custodial and Facility Service**
Owner of MMM Cleaning, Mounira Zahr supports businesses through reliable custodial services that keep workplaces safe and professional.
- **Sevyn Jones | Skin Bar VII**
Owner of Skin Bar VII, Sevyn Jones contributes to neighborhood revitalization through a luxury skincare business on W. McNichols in Detroit

“Having more access to resources has made a huge difference in how I move my business forward. As the founder of Bolt Detroit Digital Marketing Agency, having access to workshops, grants, networking and business education, along with support from different agencies across Michigan, has helped me make smarter decisions and grow with more confidence. It’s also been really meaningful to share these resources with my clients and community, so they feel more supported as they build or scale their own businesses.”

HANIA MANOUZI
Founder of Bolt Detroit
Digital Marketing





NEI GRANTEES

TRUSTED CONNECTORS

Organizations that maintain relationships with small businesses through community-based engagement while focusing on specific geographies, population segments and/or industry sectors. Trusted connectors typically refer small business owners to other resources in the ecosystem but sometimes provide their own technical and practical assistance services.

SPRING 2025

<p>Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber Fund, Inc. \$100,000 A cohort-based program providing support and technical assistance for small-business owners.</p>	<p>Global Detroit \$100,000 Delivering a suite of services designed to foster growth and sustainability to existing small businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs.</p>
<p>E. Warren Development Corp. \$100,000 Small business wrap-around services that assist businesses from ideation to establishing brick and mortar operations.</p>	<p>Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation \$110,000 Small business and economic development programming for businesses in the Grandmont Rosedale community.</p>
<p>Eastside Community Network \$100,000 Provide small business technical and practical assistance and to connect business owners to the broader business support network in the region.</p>	<p>Jefferson East, Inc. \$115,000 Services for new and existing small businesses operating on East Jefferson Avenue and along the surrounding commercial corridors.</p>
<p>Michigan Hispanic Fund \$100,000 Deliver services to address the critical needs and advancement of small businesses in the entrepreneurial community in Wayne County.</p>	<p>Live6 Alliance \$100,000 Provide small business services to help businesses sustain, scale and calibrate to meet new demands and growth opportunities tied to continued neighborhood investment.</p>

FALL 2025

<p>Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) \$135,000 Business development programming, including capital readiness, resiliency and wellness assistance; as well as expanded outreach to Oakland and Macomb counties.</p>	<p>Midtown Detroit, Inc. \$125,000 Help new and existing neighborhood businesses start and grow by connecting them to resources and business coaching.</p>
<p>Arab American Women's Business Council \$60,000 Small business services for businesses in Wayne County.</p>	<p>Osborn Neighborhood Alliance \$110,000 Help new and existing neighborhood businesses start and grow by connecting them to resources and business coaching.</p>
<p>Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation \$120,000 Conduct outreach and to provide technical assistance, revenue growth opportunities and connections to resources to small businesses in southwest Detroit and Downriver.</p>	<p>Southwest Detroit Business Association, Inc. \$85,000 Small Business Advocacy Center to expand technical assistance, workshops, coaching and advocacy for small businesses in southwest Detroit.</p>
	<p>Invest Detroit Foundation \$50,000 Facilitation of the collaborative childcare business support initiative.</p>

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS

Specialists in their field, technical assistance providers design and implement assistance programs that help entrepreneurs with specialized activities essential to growing and expanding a business.

SPRING 2025

Great Lakes Women's Business Council Existing programming and specialist services through the Business Growth Program.	\$180,000	Lawrence Technological University Centrepolis Accelerator The Centrepolis Accelerator Micro Makers Evolution Lab, which is dedicated to providing assistance to small businesses that are makers of physical products or discrete goods manufacturers.	\$150,000
Michigan Black Business Alliance Launch of the Hardy Hospitality Program to provide education and technical assistance to hospitality businesses in Wayne County.	\$150,000	SCORE SCORE SE Michigan to expand its small business mentoring program.	\$50,000
The Eastern Michigan University Foundation (EMU Michigan Small Business Development Center) The Michigan Small Business Development Center to offer counseling and training support services to small businesses in targeted Wayne County communities.	\$75,000	Regents of the University of Michigan Detroit Neighborhood Entrepreneurs Project U-M's Detroit Neighborhood Entrepreneurs Project, matching Detroit businesses with faculty-supervised student teams to provide technical assistance to neighborhood small businesses.	\$150,000

FALL 2025

Accounting Aid Society The Accounting Aid Academy to provide accounting and tax assistance services to small business owners.	\$150,000	First Children's Finance Group Training, consulting and technical assistance to help improve operations, grow capacity and build resilience among childcare businesses in southeast Michigan.	\$75,000
College for Creative Studies - Design Core Detroit Design Core Detroit to strengthen Detroit's creative businesses and connect them to small businesses seeking design services to fuel growth.	\$150,000	Wayne State University Research & Technology Park in the City of Detroit (TechTown) Support for small-business services for childcare-based businesses, including delivering operational support and building digital readiness to improve compliance, efficiency and sustainability	\$75,000
Eastern Market Corporation Cohort-based learning, one-on-one coaching and targeted technical assistance for non-food and food-based entrepreneurs and small businesses.	\$150,000		

MISSION LENDERS

Organizations that provide flexible capital to small business owners that do not qualify for loans from traditional lenders, often operating as community development financial institutions.

Some mission lenders provide technical assistance to their existing and potential borrowers, while others primarily rely on technical assistance providers.

SPRING 2025

Black Leaders Detroit No-interest loans to businesses in Detroit for expansion, working capital and equipment purchase/rental.	\$160,000
Fair Food Network Administer the Michigan Good Food Fund, including expanding technical support services to participating businesses.	\$125,000

FALL 2025

The Michigan Women's Foundation (Michigan Women Forward) Provide education, capital, technical assistance and mentoring to under-resourced entrepreneurs in the Detroit region.	\$150,000
ProsperUs Detroit Micro Lending The expansion of small-business programming including geographic and industry-specific work, and the deepening of post-loan support and microlending	\$150,000

GROWTH-STAGE BUSINESSES:

FUELING ECONOMIC IMPACT

Growth-stage businesses drive jobs, sales and wealth creation in the Detroit region, yet they face unique barriers as they scale beyond startup.

Our 2024 *State of Micro and Small Businesses in the Detroit Region* report, developed with Detroit Future City, illuminated needs among microbusinesses, most with one or two employees. It revealed that scaling entrepreneurs operate in a different reality: higher stakes, bigger payrolls, complex choices and fewer tailored supports.

This year, we partnered again to publish Growth-Stage Businesses in the Detroit Region: Insights and Solutions to Fuel Economic Impact. Through focus groups and interviews with 22 owners across Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties — primarily firms with 10–100 employees and \$250,000+ in annual revenue, we uncovered five key findings.

“The report shows we must align the region’s support structures with what growth-stage owners experience on the ground. Tools like NEI’s MI Small Business Helper connects entrepreneurs to the resources they need, which in turn creates jobs and lasting economic impact.”

Wafa Dinaro, NEI Executive Director

5 KEY FINDINGS

This work underscores the need to focus on growth-stage firms through public-private partnerships, flexible capital, universal navigation tools and stronger BSO ties. Our systems must match these entrepreneurs' ambition.

Capital access is a binding constraint. Owners described a confusing capital landscape, risk aversion from past debt issues and few flexible products with patient terms. Good options often shrink as businesses grow, stalling investments in equipment or expansion.

01



Support networks are fragmented. Early benefits from business-support organizations faded at scale, especially for tech firms. Owners cited duplicative applications, poor handoffs and a need for industry-specific advising and peer networks over short workshops.

02

Talent shortages persist. Finding workers blending technical and soft skills proves tough across sectors. Rising wages, competition from big employers and misaligned workforce programs strain growing firms, as do founders' management gaps.

03



Government systems create friction. Complex procurement, permitting and rules hinder growth despite some responsive staff. Streamlined processes, contracting coaching and navigators could ease burdens.

04

Technology offers opportunity amid hurdles. AI, software, and tools boost capacity, but high costs, setup time and expertise barriers slow adoption. Targeted funding for initial investments could drive efficiency gains.

05

Bringing the Network Office Back to CFSEM

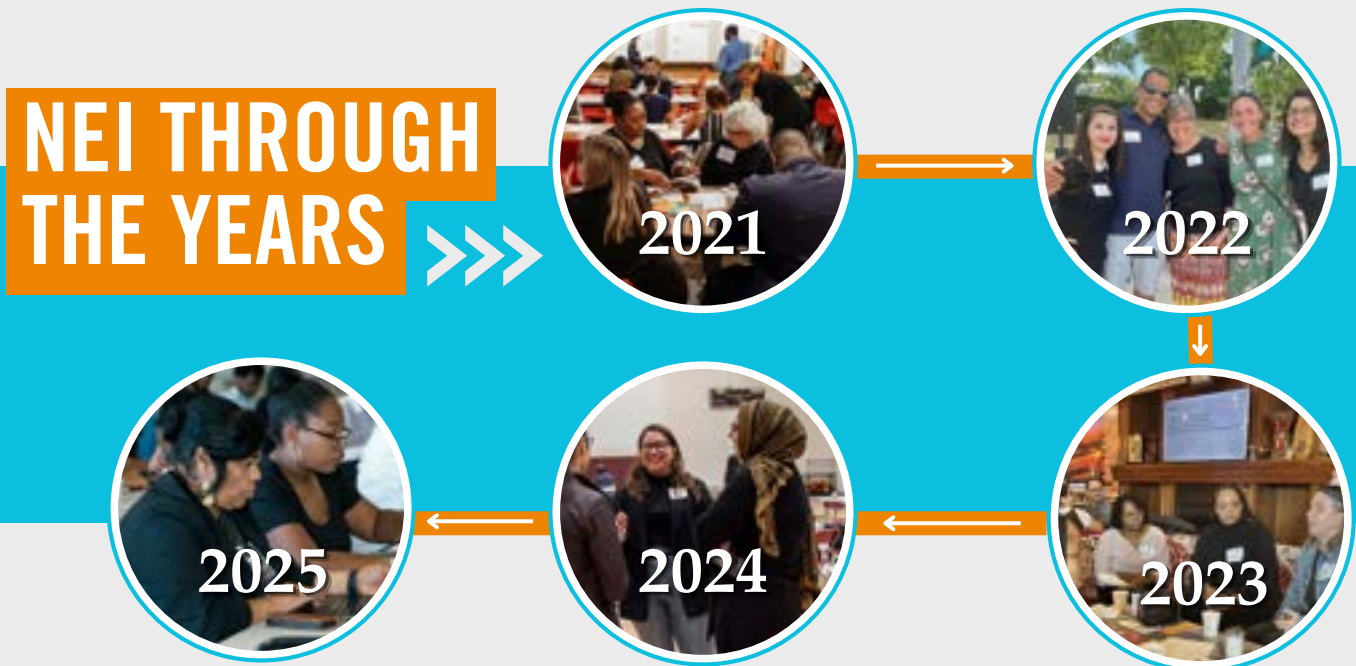
In 2025, NEI marked an important milestone in its continued commitment to strengthening the small business ecosystem across southeast Michigan. Following several years of stewardship by Invest Detroit through a partnership grant established in 2021, the Business Support Network Office transitioned back to the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan (CFSEM), effective January 2026. This change reflects an evolution in structure that enhances operational alignment while maintaining NEI’s steadfast dedication to fostering economic mobility and economic growth.

The Network Office was created to connect business support organizations, improve coordination and strengthen shared learning across the region. With the team now reintegrated into CFSEM, the work continues through a more cohesive structure that streamlines strategy, budgeting, communication and data-sharing. This transition also simplifies partner engagement and ensures that collaboration, learning and investment occur in one integrated setting.

Over the past four years, the Network Office helped establish the Worktable community, a trusted network of more than 80 organizations. Tools such as capital readiness checklists, procurement guides and digital resource libraries, along with initiatives like the CORP pilot, “Meet the Lender” events and biennial small business surveys, continue to inform NEI’s learning and grantmaking practices across the region.

“This transition allows NEI to strengthen what is already working,” said Wafa Dinero, NEI Executive Director. “By bringing the Network Office back to the Community Foundation, we can enhance efficiency, reduce confusion for our partners and continue building a coordinated system of support for entrepreneurs who are driving growth and innovation.”

With this transition complete, NEI remains focused on sustaining the relationships, data insights and collaborative practices that continue to shape a resilient and small business ecosystem.





Lily Hamburger



Mary Fulmer

**OUR WORK IS
STRENGTHENED
BY STRONG
LEADERSHIP**

As 2025 ended, we bid farewell to two key contributors Mary Fulmer and Lily Hamburger.

For eight years, Mary was a champion for NEI bringing her passion to rapid-response efforts during tough times like the pandemic, strategic projects and close partnerships that truly strengthened our region. Her dedication to the ecosystem has made a lasting impact that will remain present in our community.

Lily poured her energy into leading the Business Support Network Office at Invest Detroit for three dynamic years, championing teamwork, smart data use and fresh tools that made resources easier for founders to find. We wish Lily continued success in new role at Invest Detroit.

“Lily and Mary played vital roles for us, their hard work and passion have left a meaningful mark on NEI and the many organizations we serve. We'll carry forward their legacy of care and collaboration by the programs they helped build, ensuring entrepreneurs keep thriving in 2026 and beyond.”

**Wafa Dinaro,
Executive Director
New Economy Initiative**

Meet the NEI

ADVISORY BOARD



Paul Brown
Managing Director,
eLab Ventures



Maria Thompson
Venture Partner,
Arsenal Growth



Nathaniel Wallace
Head of Civic Partnerships,
Michigan Central



Jose L. Flores
Chief Executive Officer,
Ancor Automotive



Khalil Rahal
Director of Economic
Development, DTE Energy

NEI’s advisory board helps guide strategy and programming to build a more resilient and inclusive economy. It meets quarterly and provides insight on how to best support small businesses in underserved populations and communities throughout southeast Michigan.



OUR TEAM



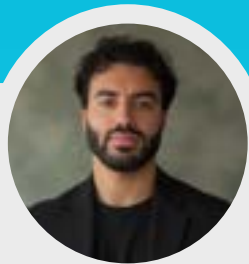
**Wafa
Dinaro**
Executive
Director



**Frederick
Paul II**
Associate
Director



**Chanel
Stitt**
Communications
Associate



**Youseph
Saad**
Program
Coordinator



**Roxana
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Manager



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*NEI is a philanthropic collaboration and initiative of the
Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan.*