

STRONG FOUNDATIONS & FORWARD PROGRESS: A TEN-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE



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

Since 2016, a number of local and national foundations have generously supported NEI's work, each contributing at different moments along its growth and evolution.



Dear friends & partners,

Over the past decade, entrepreneurs and small business owners across Southeast Michigan have navigated recovery, growth, crisis, and renewal. Through it all, the New Economy Initiative (NEI) has stayed focused on one goal: expanding access to opportunity by strengthening the organizations that serve founders and by making the support system easier to find, trust, and use.

This impact report reflects our evolution from being a catalytic investor to a long-term steward of a coordinated ecosystem. Between 2016 and 2024, NEI awarded 379 grants totaling \$53 million to 87 organizations. Together, those partners served more than 3,800 businesses a year on average, reaching a record 8,200 in 2024. The numbers matter, but the real story is in collaboration. Our network of trusted connectors, technical assistance providers, lenders, and community partners are working through the NEI Worktable to create shared tools and resources, so entrepreneurs encounter a pathway, not a maze.

Inside these pages you will find data, lessons learned, and stories of entrepreneurs who are building resilient neighborhoods and creating pathways to wealth for families. I am grateful to our grantees, funders, and partners for your commitment to equity and to the long game.

Looking ahead, this work is as urgent as ever. With sustained investment and shared focus, we can keep building an economy where opportunity is within reach for every entrepreneur.

Sincerely,

Wafa Dinaro
NEI Executive Director



Wafa Dinaro
NEI Executive Director

Frederick Paul II
Associate Director

Lily Hamburger
Director, Business Support Network Office

Mary Fulmer
Senior Program Officer

Roxana Martinelli
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Chanel Stitt
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THE EVOLUTION OF THE NEW ECONOMY INITIATIVE



The New Economy Initiative is a special project housed at the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan that works to strengthen the region's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Since its launch in 2007, NEI has invested significant grant funding into nonprofit business support organizations (BSOs) across Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw, and Wayne Counties.

Since 2016, NEI has awarded tens of millions of dollars in grants, surpassing the \$100 million mark in cumulative giving during this period and reaching more than **\$148 million in total grantmaking since 2009**. Those milestones reflect a deliberate strategy: design and integrate the ecosystem around entrepreneurs rather than fund isolated programs. NEI has been steadfast in building the infrastructure that helps entrepreneurs succeed—supporting organizations that provide the technical assistance, access to capital, mentorship, and coordinated services that enable small businesses to start, grow, and scale.

Over the past decade, NEI has moved from playing a catalytic role in Detroit's entrepreneurial resurgence to serving as a steady backbone for small business support across Southeast Michigan. Its tools have shifted in response to changing economic conditions in the region, but its underlying aim has remained steady: expand access to opportunity, strengthen the organizations that serve entrepreneurs, and ensure collaboration drives economic growth.

For many in Southeast Michigan, NEI has become a steady and strategic presence in the entrepreneurial landscape—convening partners, identifying gaps, and investing in long-term capacity. Its work has helped professionalize and connect a once-fragmented support network, aligning service providers around shared priorities and data-informed decision-making. NEI's role remains vital for the health of the region: strengthening the systems that help entrepreneurs contribute to a more dynamic and prosperous regional economy.

AN EVOLUTION OF IMPACT

2016

Close of NEI 2.0 strategy

Over **3,000** companies were assisted by NEI grantees

2018

Launched the Detroit Innovation Fellowship, with **12 fellows** selected to implement neighborhood-strengthening projects

2020

Doubled support through COVID-19 pandemic response, went from under 2,000 businesses in 2019 to nearly **5,000**

Deployed over **\$5 million** in COVID-19 relief grants

2022

Launched **Capital On Ramp Program** supporting mission-based lenders

Surpassed **600** total grants since NEI founding

2024

Created **Michigan Microbusiness Coalition** to support the unique needs of the state's microbusinesses

Annual number of businesses assisted hit a record high of **8,200** business, an over fourfold increase since 2014

2017

Introduced NEI 3.0 strategy

Leveraged capital reached **\$300 million**

2019

Published Community of Opportunity report, which included the first scan of the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem

Nearly **65,000** people exposed to NEI-funded entrepreneurial events, workshops, and programs hosted by grantees

2021

Launched the **Business Support Network** office at Invest Detroit to coordinate activities of BSOs

Leveraged capital neared a **half billion dollars**

2023

Conducted the "**Elevate Your Voice**" survey of Southeast Michigan small businesses

Awarded **\$5.5 million** in grants

2025

Launched **MI Small Business Helper**, a one-stop-shop digital platform connecting business owners and founders to resources

2016–2017

Turning Insight into Precision

In the mid-2010s, NEI's grantmaking and programmatic activities were dedicated to core support for the innovation network, identifying new ideas and programs and investing in entrepreneurial culture and promotions.

This NEI 2.0 strategy wrapped in 2016, resulting in lasting foundational infrastructure for entrepreneurship in Southeast Michigan. Investments in TechTown Detroit's MedHealth cluster, ProsperUs Detroit, and Michigan Women Forward strengthened entrepreneurial training, microlending, mentorship, and connection—particularly for founders historically disconnected from traditional systems of business capital. The formation and growth of the Neighborhood Business Initiative and loan fund supported organizations embedded in and committed to neighborhoods throughout Detroit.

The year 2017 saw the launch of a new five-year NEI 3.0 strategy that lent precision to the organization's strategy, building on what they'd learned so far. New commitments focused on strengthening neighborhood businesses in Detroit, Hamtramck,

and Highland Park; scaling high-growth companies across Southeast Michigan; supporting social innovators tackling local challenges; elevating stories that make entrepreneurship more visible and accessible; and sustaining the region's broader entrepreneurial ecosystem. Resulting programmatic and grant successes included hosting the inaugural Startup Story Night, receiving a record number of neighborhood business applicants to the NEIdeas grant challenge, and partnering with the Michigan Economic Development Corporation and Invest Detroit to launch a fund providing early stage capital for regional startups.

Together, NEI's 2.0 and 3.0 strategies prepared and then focused the foundation for a stronger, more connected entrepreneurial ecosystem across Southeast Michigan. By investing in neighborhood-based businesses, high-growth startups, mission-driven innovators, and the organizations that support them, NEI helped institutionalize critical infrastructure for entrepreneurship—expanding access to capital and mentorship while positioning the region for sustained, inclusive economic growth.



2018–2019

Sustained Support & Strategic Learning

As the network matured, NEI continued its core investments while prioritizing learning about ecosystem coordination and the evolving needs of entrepreneurs.

In 2018, NEI conducted the first-ever scan of the southeast Michigan's entrepreneurial ecosystem, identifying over 230 entrepreneurial assets in the region, over a quarter of which received NEI funding, while their business owner survey examined how entrepreneurs navigated support services and where gaps persisted. At the same time, NEI launched the **Detroit Innovation Fellowship**, connecting entrepreneurship with neighborhood revitalization. The Neighborhood Business Initiative worktable developed practical tools—capital readiness checklists, multilingual business resources, and shared referral strategies—designed to make the system easier to navigate. And budding entrepreneurs were introduced to the sector through NEI's Youth Entrepreneurship Learning Initiative, a cohort designed to identify best practices in supporting the region's youngest entrepreneurs.

Platforms like **Startup Story Night** and **High Growth Happy Hour** continued to elevate founder voices and strengthen peer learning, while a new storytelling initiative emerged in 2019: **In Good Co.**, a monthly campaign showcasing Detroit entrepreneurial success. In the same year, NEI supported over 170 NEIdeas winners and finalists at the **NEIdeas Alumni Growth series**,



connecting alumni and expert service providers on design for growth, financial strategy, and marketing acceleration. For the first time, NEI's 2019 annual Grantee Convening was expanded to include BSOs outside of its funding portfolio, increasing connectivity and partnership across the entire ecosystem.

During this period of maturation, NEI moved beyond investment alone to strengthen the connective tissue of the ecosystem: mapping regional assets, identifying service gaps, and equipping partners with practical tools to improve coordination and accessibility. By deepening learning, elevating founder voices, expanding convenings, and investing in both emerging and growth-stage entrepreneurs, NEI reinforced a more aligned, visible, and collaborative support system—positioning the region to respond collectively to the challenges that soon followed.



2020–2021

Crisis & Institutional Maturity

The COVID-19 pandemic tested the strength of the ecosystem’s partnerships and cohesion.

When small businesses faced unprecedented disruption, NEI mobilized its network through coordinated efforts such as **Detroit Means Business**, working alongside mission-based lenders and trusted community institutions to deliver stabilization support quickly. Because referral pathways and relationships were already in place, assistance quickly moved through organizations embedded in neighborhoods—such as the Detroit Development Fund, Black Leaders Detroit, Michigan Women Forward, and ProsperUs Detroit—rather than through disconnected emergency programs.

Long-standing gaps in access to capital, resources, and networks left many small businesses, particularly those in historically underserved communities, disconnected from opportunity, a challenge intensified by the pandemic. In response, NEI advocated for the creation of the **\$22 million Inclusive Small Business Support Network Fund** to provide sustained operating support, strengthen ecosystem coordination through dedicated stewardship, and attract additional investment.

The pandemic affirmed NEI’s position as a central partner in the ecosystem, as its funding stability and convening power helped anchor the region’s response to crisis. Even amid uncertainty, NEI looked outward, launching NEInsights to share its approach and elevate peer communities, grounded in the understanding that its model offered valuable insights for entrepreneurial ecosystems nationwide.

2022–2024

From Relief to Resilience

As pandemic-relief funding receded and economic uncertainty persisted, many small businesses, particularly those in underserved communities, faced renewed barriers to capital, coordination, and long-term stability.

Research NEI gathered from the **Elevate Your Voice** survey for the State of Micro and Small Businesses in the Detroit Region report confirmed ongoing disparities in access to affordable capital and financial readiness. In response, NEI sharpened its grantmaking strategy to strengthen a more resilient and coordinated support network: investing in mission-based lenders, technical assistance providers, and trusted community connectors while advancing data systems and policy alignment. Initiatives such as the **Capital On Ramp Program** paired flexible loans with structured post-loan technical assistance, integrating financial coaching and documentation support directly into the lending process to address common barriers

and better position entrepreneurs to stabilize, scale, and build long-term wealth.

Worktable action groups produced procurement guides for targeted industries, improved accessibility across communication channels, and developed capital health tools used across the network. Key supports also included detailed guides and checklists developed to help entrepreneurs open brick-and-mortar businesses and navigate the real estate process. Place-based collaborations, including commercial corridor resilience efforts and microretail accelerator models, demonstrated how coordinated infrastructure can translate into neighborhood-level impact. A newly created digital access action group also launched workshops to help business owners adopt new technologies and tools to strengthen operations.

After years of investing in and learning alongside ecosystem partners, NEI was uniquely positioned to move beyond program delivery into policy advocacy—translating on-the-ground experience into informed leadership at the systems level. In 2023, NEI launched the **Michigan Microbusiness Coalition**, advocating for clearer definitions and more tailored statewide support for the smallest businesses. This marked a continued and important evolution: aligning programmatic investment with structural policy change.



A Steadfast Commitment

While tactics evolved, several principles remained steady.

□ ACCESS AS A THROUGHLINE.

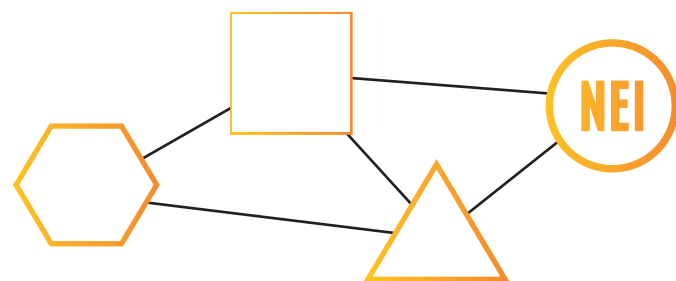
Each year, the majority of businesses served are led by entrepreneurs who have historically faced barriers with traditional financial and business support systems. Through comprehensive outreach and adaptive lending and assistance models, NEI has focused consistently on closing access gaps.

⬡ INVESTMENT IN INTERMEDIARIES.

NEI has consistently strengthened entrepreneurial support organizations rather than building a centralized service arm. Investments in organizations such as TechTown Detroit, Eastern Market Corporation, the Arab American Women's Business Council, the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation, and many others reflect a sustained commitment to institutional capacity.

△ CONVENING AS INFRASTRUCTURE.

The NEI Worktable, now including more than 180 collaborating organizations, has become a standing forum for alignment across capital access, procurement readiness, digital capacity, and commercial corridor strategy. Convening is not just an event; it is an intentional opportunity to survey the ecosystem and amend organizational focus based on the expressed needs of business owners.



A Coordinated System, *Not a Collection of Programs*

Today, NEI operates less as a program launcher and more as a systems steward. Its work includes refining capital readiness pathways, supporting procurement strategies, hosting structured convenings, improving resource awareness and navigation, and ensuring that referrals across the ecosystem are intentional and coordinated.

At its core, NEI provides guidance, collaboration, focus, and sustained coordination for the organizations that serve entrepreneurs. By aligning trusted connectors, technical assistance providers, mission-based lenders, accelerators, and policy advocates within a shared framework, NEI enables specialization without fragmentation. Organizations can focus on what they do best while remaining integrated into a larger system.

Without NEI's commitment to coordination, the region's support landscape would likely be more fragmented and harder to navigate. Instead, NEI helps create cohesion, shared language, and a common understanding of the needs of entrepreneurs. That cohesion strengthens institutions, clarifies pathways, and ensures that entrepreneurs in Detroit and Southeast Michigan—particularly those facing structural barriers—encounter a coordinated system rather than a maze of disconnected programs.



BY THE NUMBERS

NEI's role as an ecosystem builder is reflected not only in its strategy, but in the scale and focus of its investments. Across Southeast Michigan—including Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw, and Wayne Counties—NEI supports a broad network of organizations that collectively strengthen the region's entrepreneurial infrastructure. Between 2016 and 2024, NEI awarded 379 grants totaling \$53 million. Of that amount, \$52 million was directed to BSOs providing technical assistance and capacity-building services to entrepreneurs, while the remaining supported NEIdea grant recipients. These partners leveraged NEI's funding to deliver coaching, training, and operational support, creating opportunities for connection and collaboration that sustained and grew businesses throughout the Detroit region.

ENTREPRENEURIAL SUPPORT SYSTEM 2016-2024

87

Grantees supporting the entrepreneurial ecosystem between 2016 and 2024

379

NEI grants totaling **\$53 million**

250+

Ecosystem members

34k+

Businesses supported through NEI funded efforts

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM 2016-2024

3,800+

NEI and its grantees provided services and support to over 3,800 businesses annually

7,200

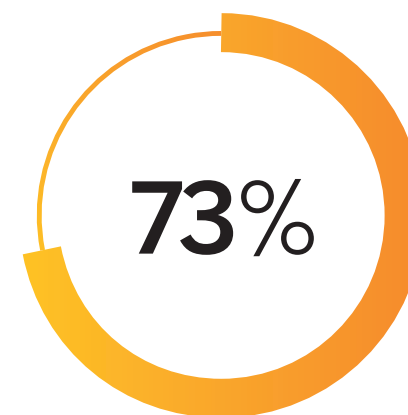
In total, NEI-supported entrepreneurs employed an average of 7,200 people annually.

1,600

That employment generated an additional 1,600 jobs in the region each year.

Entrepreneurs raised other investment dollars through grants, angel and seed funding, loans, and gifts from friends and family to support business development plans, pay salaries, purchase capital inputs, and expand capital investment. Between 2016 and 2024 entrepreneurs in Southeast Michigan raised \$2.9 billion in other investment funds.

Entrepreneurs generated over **\$1.3 billion** in revenue over the nine-year period.



73% was from hospitality (27%); professional, scientific, and technical services (21%); retail (14%); and manufacturing (11%).

Through these direct jobs, revenue, and other investment funds between 2016 and 2024, entrepreneurs supported a total of:

8,800

Jobs annually on average

\$1.4B

In wages

\$2.8B

Additional economic spending

\$7.1B

Total output

NEI

THE POWER

OF

PARTNERSHIPS



While NEI’s economic impact is measurable in dollars and activity, its true force has been relational. The power of partnerships—across nonprofits, funders, and community organizations—has been the engine behind these results. NEI’s approach has always been grounded in a simple belief that strong entrepreneurs require strong support systems. Instead of launching isolated programs, NEI invests in a collaborative ecosystem of business and entrepreneurial support organizations where specialized expertise, regional and neighborhood-level knowledge, and community trust intersect.

NEI funds a diverse network of partners that play complementary roles in strengthening the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Technical assistance providers deliver specialized, hands-on support in areas such as marketing, accounting, financial management, business planning, and product development, helping entrepreneurs build the skills and systems needed to grow. Mission-based lenders expand access to flexible capital for small business owners who may not qualify for traditional bank financing, often combining lending with advisory support, while others partner closely with technical assistance providers to ensure borrowers have both capital and capacity. In addition, NEI funds trusted connectors. These community-based organizations maintain strong relationships with entrepreneurs in specific geographies, industries, or population groups and serve as on-ramps to the broader ecosystem, identifying needs, building trust, and referring small business owners to relevant resources.

NEI ensures that entrepreneurs in Southeast Michigan are part of an established network where they can access specialized resources to nurture their small businesses and have a tailored, established safety net ready to catch them and lift them up. The grantees highlighted in this report illustrate the range and depth of these resources; however, they represent only a portion of NEI’s full portfolio.

Detroit's Entrepreneur Ecosystem Grows Through Partnership, Flexible Funding, & Language Access



From the start, ProsperUs Detroit has played a connective role in bringing together partners, neighborhoods, and entrepreneurs so that critical support reaches the people who need it most. They credit NEI with helping them understand and nurture the idea that community and social capital are as important as financial capital.

The early work of ProsperUs Detroit centered on relationship-building and a commitment to collaboration over duplication. Those initial connections laid the foundation for a network designed not as a collection of standalone programs, but as an ecosystem where organizations enhance one another's efforts.

The model at the core of the organization's mission is rooted in supporting neighborhoods that have historically received less investment. Rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach, ProsperUs Detroit connects entrepreneurs to business services, technical assistance, and financial wellness support that reflect their lived realities. Supporting entrepreneurs holistically ensures they have what they need to sustain both personal and business finances, two sides of the same coin for many small business owners.

Over the past five years, rising costs and post-pandemic pressures have reshaped the kind of support that small businesses need to be successful. Originally focused on immigrant entrepreneurs and formerly incarcerated individuals, ProsperUs Detroit has now expanded its scope while maintaining a commitment to microbusinesses and entrepreneurs navigating systemic barriers. One of those changes has been pioneering non-extractive, flexible capital and other stabilizing activities like interest-rate buy-downs, enhancements that improve entrepreneurs' credit profiles, and capital structures that meet them where they are now while strengthening long-term stability.

ProsperUs Detroit has also invested in corridor development and testing new ideas that would be difficult to attempt alone. Shared values across the network create space to experiment, learn, and adapt, particularly for second-stage entrepreneurs navigating growth and transition. For example, creating business clusters helps address the drop-off in customers that



can happen to a new business after the initial surge of excitement at launch. By saturating one area with different offerings, small business owners can draw customers together and create community destinations rather than isolated storefronts.

Another way ProsperUs Detroit is helping small businesses draw customers together is through embracing different languages spoken within the community. From partnerships with Spanish-speaking organizations and language-specific experts to participation in a language justice action group, ProsperUs Detroit helps ensure entrepreneurs can access resources in ways that translate best for business.

For ProsperUs Detroit, NEI's impact on the regional economy is clear. The network is intentionally built around partnership and listening, rather than top-down approaches that prioritize institutional goals over entrepreneurs' needs. Support is tailored to the realities of microbusinesses instead of forcing them into models designed for larger operations.

Looking ahead, ProsperUs Detroit sees affordable, flexible capital and advocacy that protects entrepreneurs and the communities they serve as essential. While trusted connectors help entrepreneurs find their footing within the ecosystem, long-term stability depends on having the financial systems in place to sustain and grow their businesses. As costs rise and pressures increase, sustained investment, outside capital, and strong support systems will be critical to preserving the gains made in neighborhoods across Southeast Michigan.

From Jargon to Clarity: Accounting Aid Society Builds Financial Confidence in Southeast Michigan

For many small business owners, the hardest part of running a business isn't the product, the service, or even finding customers. It's the numbers: balance sheets, tax codes, compliance requirements, loan reporting. These terms alone can feel like a barrier before the work even begins.

For more than 50 years, Accounting Aid Society has helped organizations and individuals make sense of their finances. What began as support for nonprofit startups has evolved into a specialized role within Southeast Michigan's entrepreneurial ecosystem that business owners can count on.

As a member of NEI's business support network since its inception, Accounting Aid Society focuses solely on financial operations. Many of the entrepreneurs they serve are highly capable visionaries, skilled at executing ideas and serving customers. However, business owners can get overwhelmed by the complexity and jargon of economic concepts. Accounting Aid Society helps them translate financial models into practical, understandable systems that allow owners to separate personal and business finances, stay compliant with loans, and build confidence in their numbers.

One thing Accounting Aid Society wants small businesses to know is that they don't need to be afraid of their finances. With the right support, understanding the numbers is not only possible, but one of the most powerful tools they have.

"We work with business owners who are brilliant at executing ideas," says Gabrielle Thomas, chief strategy officer. "But financial systems are full of jargon, and that language alone can shut people out. Our job is to take the fear and confusion out of it."

Their work often begins with referrals from other NEI-funded partners that know when a business is ready for deeper financial support. This can be a specific goal, such as preparing for receiving capital or meeting reporting requirements from community development financial institutions. Depending on the

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GABRIELLE THOMAS

Chief Strategy Officer, Accounting Aid Society



need, Accounting Aid Society may work with a business for a single session or spend 30 to 40 hours alongside an owner, building processes designed to eventually be handed off to an affordable bookkeeper.

Over the past five years, the needs of entrepreneurs have shifted. During the COVID-19 pandemic, demand surged as businesses sought emergency funding. In its wake, many owners emerged with a clearer understanding that financial readiness is essential not just for survival, but for growth. Accounting Aid Society responded by deepening partnerships with lenders and adapting programs to support long-term financial stability.

One example is the THRIVE program, a yearlong cohort that paired over 20 businesses with both a bookkeeper and an accountant, creating space for deep learning and peer support. The success of that model led to the Excellence Series, which continues to use cohort-based learning to help entrepreneurs build lasting financial capacity.

Thomas, who oversees emerging programs and helps guide the organization's long-term strategy, believes NEI's broader impact is visible on Detroit's streets. "I know who's supporting those small businesses but also who is supporting neighborhoods. Making them

more walkable and stronger," she said. "Without their network the neighborhoods in Detroit wouldn't be as vibrant as they are now."

Within NEI's network, Accounting Aid Society sees collaboration as the difference-maker. Rather than operating in isolation, partners actively direct entrepreneurs to the right support at the right time, creating a system that's easy to navigate instead of fragmented. According to Thomas, continued growth in the network is essential. Sustaining and expanding trusted relationships among support organizations ensures entrepreneurs aren't left to figure things out on their own.

"The way NEI has intentionally moved forward for longevity and not a quick fix has been incredible," said Thomas. "Their commitment to the long term is what's made this successful. The positive attitude and the commitment to inclusiveness and to shared outcomes is extremely positive. There's no sense of competition, there's only togetherness."

LGBTQ+ Accelerator Builds Belonging Into Business Support

For LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs, starting and growing a business can mean navigating both the challenges of entrepreneurship and the realities of exclusion from traditional systems. This accelerator was founded to close that gap by offering culturally competent, affirming support for LGBTQ+ and ally businesses across Southeast Michigan.

Now in its third NEI-supported grant cycle, the organization operates the Queer Equity Impact Program, a 12-week accelerator that mirrors the broader entrepreneurial system while accounting for the intersectional identities of LGBTQ+ business owners and the barriers they might face. Through NEI's investment, the organization has expanded its reach beyond Wayne County and strengthened its ability to connect entrepreneurs to capital, mentorship, and technical assistance.

The accelerator focuses on core business fundamentals like limited liability company formation, financial literacy, pitching, marketing, and business planning. As technology evolves, entrepreneurs are expected to keep pace, often without the time or resources to do so. In response, the organization integrated AI and digital tools into its curriculum, shifting from lecture-style seminars to hands-on workshops that help entrepreneurs immediately apply what they learn.

As a trusted connector within NEI's business support network, the organization brings ecosystem partners directly into each cohort. Access-to-capital panels that feature lenders and technical assistance providers from across the NEI network have become a cornerstone of the program. These sessions give entrepreneurs a chance to ask real questions, understand current

financing landscapes, and build relationships that extend beyond the accelerator.

The organization also addresses common barriers, including procurement challenges for microbusinesses and one-person operations. The accelerator helps entrepreneurs pursue realistic, sustainable growth by setting achievable goals for small and medium-sized businesses and providing access to chamber members and mentors.

From the chamber's perspective, NEI's greatest contribution is making the ecosystem easier to navigate. While resources exist, many entrepreneurs feel overwhelmed by choices and unsure of where to begin. NEI's network helps reduce that friction ensuring entrepreneurs know what questions to ask and where to turn next.

Looking ahead, the organization emphasizes placemaking as critical to economic mobility and growth. The vision includes spaces where LGBTQ+ and ally businesses can thrive together and communities where entrepreneurs are not only supported, but visible, connected, and empowered.

Their advice to entrepreneurs reflects the lived experience of those within the organization—failure is part of success. With the right community around you, stumbling becomes a step forward rather than a stopping point.



Guiding Hispanic Entrepreneurs Through Detroit's Next Chapter

The Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation (DHDC) emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, when informal businesses across Detroit were finding opportunity but lacking the structure, resources, and support to grow. What began as a series of small business events in Corktown quickly revealed a deeper need for many Hispanic and Latinx entrepreneurs operating informally and in need of technical assistance.

Recognizing this need, DHDC expanded services to include one-on-one coaching and cohort-based programs offered in both Spanish and English. Centered on accessibility by using plain language and culturally responsive support, their approach focused on helping entrepreneurs take the next step without fear or intimidation. A visit from NEI staff at one of their early events sparked a new partnership to strengthen the broader ecosystem and DHDC was invited to join the business support network. The organization received its first round of NEI funding in 2022 and was quickly integrated into ecosystem roundtables and collaborative worktables.

"People in Detroit do things fearlessly, and it can be intimidating to ask for help. It can feel like this information is not for me if you're speaking to someone using formal language. We use plain language or speak in Spanish. A word like financial projections can sound intimidating but if I can show you how to create a budget and increase it by 3 percent every three years that's more manageable," a DHDC staff member said.

In recent years, many businesses have transitioned from pop-ups and vendor markets to brick-and-mortar storefronts. This brought new challenges for small

business owners related to permits, staffing, insurance, and sustainability. At the same time, shifting federal policies have created added complexity for some small businesses. DHDC has expanded its services to include proactive planning, regulatory guidance, and contingency support to help businesses remain stable and resilient in changing conditions.

Collaboration within NEI's business support network has shaped this work. Partnerships with organizations like Accounting Aid Society, ProsperUs Detroit, TechTown Detroit, and the Southwest Detroit Business Association allow entrepreneurs to access specialized expertise for business owners just starting up. Together, these partners host monthly networking events, Latin-X-Tech meetups, and initiatives like Walk in Wednesdays that make support visible and approachable.

DHDC plays a leading role in advancing language justice across this established ecosystem. They advocate for plain language, live interpretation, captioning, and accessible design, ensuring that access goes beyond translation and enables participation. These efforts are reshaping how support is delivered across the entire network, not just within one organization.

Looking ahead, DHDC sees opportunity for organizations in NEI's network to provide smaller, more flexible forms of capital paired with real support. Even modest loans can be transformative when paired with coaching and trust in the ecosystem. DHDC staff emphasized the importance of investing in organizations that have deep roots in the communities they serve, because once you build trust it becomes a powerful engine for economic participation.

DHDC staff were clear: NEI's impact lies in scale and coordination. By investing in BSOs, NEI extends its reach to thousands of entrepreneurs who are earning a living outside traditional workforce systems.

Great Lakes Women's Business Council Builds Skills That Outlast Funding

Great Lakes Women's Business Council (WBC) was founded 41 years ago to provide access to the tools and opportunities needed to build successful businesses. Established as a response to barriers rooted in policy and institutional practices, the organization began as a microlending program and quickly realized that capital alone was not enough.



Through the years, Great Lakes WBC has expanded its approach to include mentoring, technical assistance, and growth-focused programming through its Women's Business Center. Today, the organization supports approximately 2,000 businesses each year. Their work is helping entrepreneurs move from startup to sustainability and into scaling and second-stage growth.

Within NEI's business support network, Great Lakes WBC plays a critical role in helping businesses prepare for what comes after launch. Through NEI funding, the organization operates the Business Growth Program, which supports entrepreneurs looking to strengthen and scale operations and compete in an increasingly complex marketplace. Other Great Lakes WBC programming includes guidance on pitching, capability statements, capital readiness, and navigating procurement opportunities.

Digital transformation has accelerated across industries, pushing many entrepreneurs to adopt virtual models and compete in global markets. In response, Great Lakes WBC adapted its curriculum by introducing hybrid programming and integrating sustainability and responsible business practices. Cybersecurity and emerging technologies like AI are now focus areas for their programs. This curriculum allows businesses to remain resilient and relevant as the economy continues to evolve.

Collaboration within NEI's business support network has strengthened this work. Partners meet regularly to share best practices, co-host panels, and align services, reducing duplication and strengthening outcomes for entrepreneurs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when connections across the ecosystem became fragile, NEI played a pivotal role in rebuilding trust and reestablishing collaboration.



"NEI has been a gamechanger. The sharing of talent and skills will far exceed the period of the grant," said Shawntay Dixon, senior director of education and program operations.

Through worktables and joint programming, organizations like the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services and others within the network co-train, exchange expertise, and show up collectively for clients. This collaborative spirit ensures entrepreneurs experience the ecosystem as coordinated rather than fragmented.

Great Lakes WBC says that NEI's greatest impact lies in its ability to fill gaps for startups, helping them transition through growth stages, where affordable consulting and tailored support can be hardest to access. As entrepreneurship in Southeast Michigan continues to skew heavily toward startups, sustained investment in second-stage businesses will be essential to maintaining momentum.

Looking ahead, Great Lakes WBC sees continued opportunity for NEI to lead through advocacy and to attract opportunities to the region. This will ensure entrepreneurs not only have access to resources, but the guidance and partnerships needed to grow with confidence.

NEI has been a gamechanger. The sharing of talent and skills will far exceed the period of the grant.

SHAWNTAY DIXON

*Senior Director of Education & Program Operations,
Great Lakes Women's Business Council*

INVESTMENT IN ACTION

The strength of the ecosystem is ultimately measured in the progress of the businesses it supports. Where partnerships are strong, entrepreneurs experience meaningful momentum. The voices of those entrepreneurs offer a direct window into how NEI's investments shape opportunity on the ground.

When entrepreneurs in Southeast Michigan are asked what matters most in running a business, the common theme is the community that rallies around them. Whether it's monetary or resource based, having people around who want to see the entrepreneur succeed is repeatedly cited by local business owners as the number one thing for increasing the longevity of a small business. That sense of community is what makes NEI's small business network special and what has helped so many small business owners open, sustain, or grow their operations.





Bringing Liberian Culture to Michigan's Table

For chef and owner of Little Liberia, Ameneh Marhaba, food has always been about more than what's on a plate. Since launching her pop-up and catering business in 2016, she's used Liberian cuisine as a way to share culture and spark curiosity.

"It's not just about the food," Marhaba said. "Anyone can get a plate anywhere. But most people who come to my pop-ups have never even heard of Liberia. I get to share my culture through the food."

After years of pop-ups and catering events, Marhaba is setting the table for her own success, opening doors and welcoming people to the first Liberian restaurant in Michigan. Opened in early 2026, Little Liberia's new brick-and-mortar space in the East Warren commercial corridor will seat more than 100 guests and include a full bar and lounge, creating jobs and a welcoming gathering place in the community.

The journey to this moment hasn't been easy. As a woman and an immigrant starting a business on her own, Marhaba felt she often had to work harder to be taken seriously, especially when navigating real estate, financing, and construction.

"The biggest challenge has been being a woman immigrant without a partner," she explained. "People don't always take you seriously. I lost a lot of money early on just trying to secure a location."

Still, she pushed forward, seeing each obstacle as part of a larger purpose.

"Breaking the glass ceiling doesn't end with me opening this restaurant," Marhaba said. "But I'm setting an example by going through systems others haven't had to."

As Little Liberia moved toward having its own dedicated space, access to the right support became critical. Through NEI's ecosystem, Marhaba connected with multiple BSOs that played an important role at different stages.

She worked with ProsperUs Detroit, Motor City Match, Detroit Means Business, TechTown Detroit, Hatch Detroit, and Invest Detroit, applying for grants, loans, and equipment funding while receiving hands-on guidance and mentorship.

ProsperUs Detroit helped her shape her business plan and navigate grant applications. Hatch Detroit provided more intensive, hands-on support. Through TechTown Detroit, she secured an equipment grant and was paired with mentoring support that helped close key funding gaps and move the project forward. Connecting with

one organization often led to another, demonstrating how NEI's business support network functions as an interconnected system rather than a collection of isolated programs.

Shortly after opening day, the focus shifted from funding to execution. Like many entrepreneurs, Marhaba knows her craft, but running a full-service restaurant requires expertise far beyond the kitchen.

"We know how to cook, but architecture, plumbing, accounting, payroll, POS systems that's a lot," she said. "If someone could help set those systems up, I could focus on what I do best."

Looking ahead, she hopes the entrepreneurial ecosystem continues to grow in ways that foster deeper connection among business owners—not just access to programs, but sustained peer support. Marhaba believes it really takes a community to be successful. "The resources are there, but you have to put yourself out there. I've learned that because the community showed up for me."

Once open, Little Liberia plans to host monthly community events and Entrepreneurship 101 sessions, creating space for people to share talents, stories, and the realities of building a business.

"I just wish our systems were more equitable," she adds. "But until they are, I'll keep creating space where people feel seen, welcomed, and supported."



It's not just about the food. Anyone can get a plate anywhere. But most people who come to my pop-ups have never even heard of Liberia. I get to share my culture through the food.

AMENEH MARHABA
Chef & Owner, Little Liberia



A Blueprint for Community & Generational Wealth



In 2008, Tanya Ali launched AGI Construction to prioritize neighborhood projects and create opportunities for hyper-local talent after seeing firsthand the barriers minority-owned businesses faced in the construction industry.

“We asked ourselves, how do we become a solution to our own barriers?” Ali recalls. From churches and schools to small businesses, the firm set out to provide quality, affordable construction while also giving back to the community it calls home.

For Ali, running a business has its rewards and its challenges but the most fulfilling part has been supporting projects in neighborhoods she knows

personally and hiring local talent. “Being able to add value to someone’s property and assets, knowing it contributes to long-term generational wealth is what makes the push to complete each project so worth it,” she explains. But the road hasn’t been smooth. As a minority women-owned firm in the construction industry, Ali says she has to “perform at a rigorous metric all the time,” avoiding mistakes that other owners might make just to prove herself worthy to be in the industry.

AGI’s first connection with NEI came through a roundtable panel on an unfinished project, where participants discussed common barriers in the industry. By addressing specific topics with contractors who could tackle each barrier, these sessions turned into mentorship opportunities. The initial support also helped lay the foundation for AGI’s social workforce arm, DFO313, which now includes legal support and other resources for local contractors.

NEI’s business support network continued to provide guidance and connections for AGI. They helped AGI create a safe space to explore industry-specific technical assistance and new strategies. Additional programs, including the Detroit Neighborhood Entrepreneurship Project, helped conceptualize the social workforce arm while Motor City Match assisted in securing properties that strengthened the firm’s asset portfolio.

Ali says she’s proud of hiring from the community and being able to create a trusted network of reliable contractors. For her, it’s important that the work they’re doing contributes to long-term generational wealth and creates more vibrant neighborhoods. AGI’s next big milestone is a project that’s going to double, if not triple, their revenue and they need to hire more employees. They’re planning on leaning on NEI’s network as an important resource for guidance on scaling and advocacy, helping the team navigate the next stage of growth.

Through mentorship and access to tailored resources, AGI exemplifies how a connected ecosystem can help small businesses thrive and build the communities around them.

“Running a small business in Detroit is not for the faint of heart. It’s an amazing time to be part of the Detroit renaissance happening right now,” Ali says. “There’s so much room for entrepreneurs to become part of the solution for what’s needed in our neighborhoods.”



Being able to add value to someone’s property and assets, knowing it contributes to long-term generational wealth is what makes the push to complete each project so worth it.

TANYA ALI
 Founder, AGI Construction



The Next Chapter of Connection & Belonging

27th Letter Books began as a response to a question. What does it look like to build something meaningful in a time when connection can feel hard to find?

Inspired by independent bookstores they encountered while traveling the country, founders Drew and Erin Pineda imagined a space that could function as more than a retail shop. They wanted a space that acts as a window into new ideas. A door to human connection and community building. That vision first took shape through pop-ups before growing into a permanent neighborhood bookstore in southwest Detroit.

“I wanted this to be more than a place where people buy books. I wanted it to be somewhere people feel like they belong,” Drew Pineda said.

The prologue for how the store would function seemed to be already written. A bookstore that reflects the community it serves, hosts conversations, and acts

as a gathering place. Turning that vision into reality, however, came with challenges that went far beyond shelving inventory.

Like many small business owners, securing capital and finding the right location proved difficult. Understanding leases, build-out costs, and operating expenses all at once was overwhelming, especially while trying to stay true to the mission of keeping the space accessible and community-centered.

“You don’t realize how many decisions you have to make until you’re in it. Every choice feels high stakes when you’re putting everything you have into your business,” Pineda noted.

That’s where connection to NEI’s small business support network became pivotal. Through the network, the owners were able to work with organizations that helped break down complex processes into manageable steps by offering guidance on financing, business planning, and navigating the realities of opening a brick-and-mortar storefront.



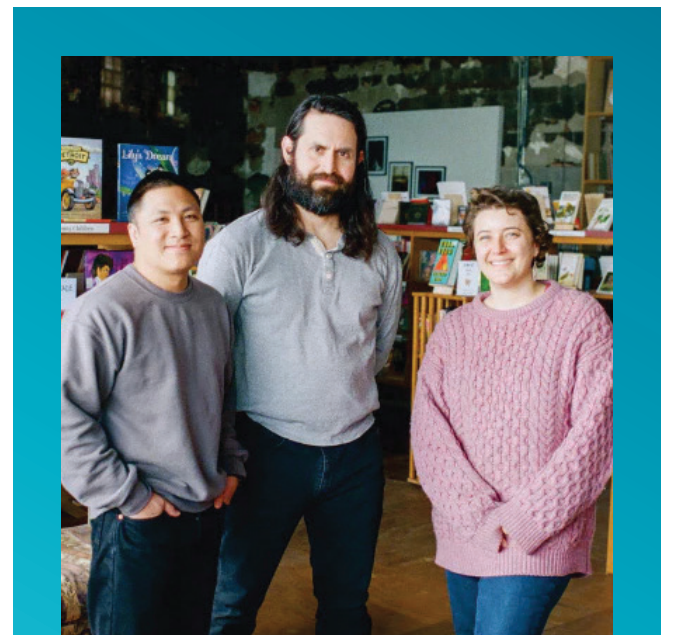
Rather than a single program or service, it was the combination of supports and the way organizations worked together that made the difference. What changed everything for the Pinedas was, “having people explain things in plain language and actually walk alongside me through the process.”

As the bookstore wrote its own story, its role in the local economy took shape. Beyond creating jobs, the space now hosts events that can support local authors. Customer foot traffic to the corridor contributes to the vitality of the neighborhood in ways that extend well beyond retail sales.

Looking ahead, they see growth not just in terms of revenue, but in deeper community engagement and sustainability. Continued access to technical assistance and opportunities for peer learning so the bookshop can navigate what comes next will be crucial for their staying power.

“Running a small business takes a community. You can’t do this alone and you shouldn’t have to,” says Drew Pineda.

The journey of 27th Letter Books reflects what is possible when entrepreneurs are met with the right support. Through NEI’s business support network, individual visions are strengthened by collaboration, turning the story of a single storefront into a shared community asset.



I wanted this to be more than a place where people buy books. I wanted it to be somewhere people feel like they belong.

DREW PINEDA
Founder, 27th Letter Books

Salsa, Scale, & Community Spirit

For years, Marie Groom, her dad Al, and their employees faced the labor-intensive task of filling jars of her family’s salsa by hand. Using a hand pump took time and limited the business’s ability to scale efficiently and accurately.

Through an NEIdeas grant, Pronko Enterprises received \$10,000 in 2014 to purchase an automated piston filler that would help them fill jars at a much faster rate. This small investment proved to be transformational. According to Groom, “that \$10,000 resulted in a half-million-dollar business,” highlighting how targeted support can help a small business take its first step toward scalable manufacturing.

That critical funding helped Pronko Enterprises expand from operating Maria’s House Made Salsa to also establishing Pronko Co-packing, serving around

35 Michigan companies. Supporting other food entrepreneurs is a point of pride for Groom. Being able to help other businesses grow reflects her commitment to building a stronger, collaborative local economy.

From the beginning, NEI played a role in enabling this broader impact. Groom learned about the NEIdeas grant through the City of Hamtramck Downtown Development Authority. That initial connection helped the business acquire essential equipment, but it also created the confidence to pursue larger-scale operations in the years that followed.

Since receiving the NEI grant, Pronko Enterprises has outgrown its original facility and continues to expand. The next big milestone is installing a fully automated bottling line. This will require \$25,000 to \$30,000 to cover equipment and staff training along with careful planning to scale while maintaining quality and efficiency. NEI’s network remains a potential resource as the company looks to navigate logistics and access additional funding.



Reflecting on running a small business in Detroit, Groom has a lot of pride and a healthy serving of hard-earned perspective. “Small business is big business. We’re the ones making up the economy. Our voices need to be heard,” she says. “Our purchases keep a lot of business going with our organization and clients that we have.” Over the years, she’s noticed a positive cultural shift in Southeast Michigan’s entrepreneurial community. She used to feel closed off, but now local business owners are open to collaboration and willing to support one another.

Looking ahead, Groom hopes the region continues to grow and evolve, with organizations like NEI continuing to support sustainable business expansion without compromising the close-knit small business culture. Her advice to other entrepreneurs is to “be specific about what you’re asking for in grant applications, scale thoughtfully, and embrace the slow but positive growth process.” What started as a question of how to fill salsa jars faster has become a recipe for growth, innovation, and community building. NEI’s early support helped Pronko Enterprises scale their operations, support other food entrepreneurs, and strengthen Michigan’s local food ecosystem one batch at a time.

Small business is big business. We’re the ones making up the economy. Our voices need to be heard.

MARIE GROOM
Owner, Pronko Enterprises





From Barbershop to Community Hub

Barbershops have always been a place to get more than just a haircut. For Dante Williams, owner of Cutz Lounge, that bigger purpose was a family-friendly space that's deeply connected to the community in ways he didn't see happening in other shops across Detroit.

When he first opened, he had little access to resources and no connections in the city, but that didn't stop him from creating a spot his community could count on for more than a quick line-up. Over time, Cutz Lounge has become a place known not just for quality haircuts, but for how it shows up for the neighborhood. Located right on a busy street in downtown Detroit, the shop is visible and welcoming. "Being right off Grand River, people know who we are and they can come here as a safe space," he said.

Throughout the years, the shop hosts back-to-school haircut events each summer; partners with an organization offering free books for kids, encouraging reading instead of screen time; and provides room for vendors during community events.

That commitment to community has grown into something bigger. With support from a Motor City Match grant, Cutz Lounge began building out a kitchen in the space next door to the barbershop. In an area with few sit-down restaurant options, Williams wanted to offer the community somewhere familiar to enjoy a meal. The kitchen is designed to host a main chef several days a week and weekend brunch, while also offering space for pop-up chefs to try out their ideas and get a real feel for operating a restaurant. Williams also plans to use the space for youth engagement programs like chef-led lessons, opportunities to learn home repair or carpentry skills, and intentional conversations with young Black men.

The best part of running the business, Williams says, is the reach he has within the community. The hardest part is everything that comes with building and sustaining something this expansive. The financial pressure has been heavy, the kitchen build-out took a toll, and the time commitment has meant less time with his family. The shop has also dealt with break-ins and stolen equipment. But he's found that the benefit of building your space around community is that they show up for you too. When a window was broken during an attempted theft, community members stepped in to help cover the cost without being asked.



NEI was crucial for finding a network of barbers and cosmetologists to connect and see how they're doing things and change how I'm doing things.

DANTE WILLIAMS
Owner, Cutz Lounge

Before connecting with NEI's business support network, access to capital and finding barbers and renters were major challenges. The turning point came through NEI's Barber and Beauty group, which brought together barbers and cosmetologists to share what they were experiencing and how they were navigating the business side of their work. "I was thinking about closing. Meeting with the group gave me a push," Williams recalled.

Those connections shifted how he approached his own business. "NEI was crucial for finding a network of barbers and cosmetologists to connect and see how they're doing things and change how I'm doing things."

Over the past ten years in the neighborhood, he's consistently pointed other entrepreneurs toward resources he's used himself. Working with ProsperUs Detroit, TechTown, Detroit Future City, SCORE, and Black Leaders Detroit has shaped how he thinks about growth and sustainability.

The next chapter for Cutz Lounge includes launching the new programs alongside opening Cutz Café and continuing to build awareness that the space is available for small events serving 50 to 70 people. For him, visibility matters just as much as infrastructure. Looking ahead, he hopes that the entrepreneurs like him who are still standing after so many closures aren't forgotten and they continue to have access to helpful business resources.



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Southeast Michigan's entrepreneurial ecosystem stands at an important moment of continued evolution. Over the past decade, meaningful and scalable progress has been made to expand access to capital, strengthen entrepreneurial support organizations, and build a more connected infrastructure for business owners across the region.

Looking back from 2009 to 2024, the New Economy Initiative awarded 766 grants to BSOs, provided \$148.1 million to grantees, and assisted 37,977 companies. This impact continues to grow as they work to align partners, reduce duplication, create a shared language across the ecosystem, and make more informed, real-time decisions in support of regional business owners and entrepreneurs.

The entrepreneurial landscape is inherently dynamic and continues to evolve in real time. In recent years, NEI has supported growth across the full spectrum of the economy—from high-growth tech startups, smart mobility, and emerging technology ventures to microbusinesses, legacy companies, and neighborhood-based businesses anchoring commercial corridors. As innovation reshapes industries and entrepreneurs revitalize storefronts and neighborhoods alike, the ecosystem must respond to both opportunity and disruption. Sustained effort and strategic adaptation will be essential to build on this momentum, deepen impact, and strengthen pathways for entrepreneurs operating in both emerging sectors and traditional Main Street economies.

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Although this retrospective covers 2016–2024, the work has not paused. In 2025, NEI advanced several new initiatives and strategic priorities, signaling the next chapter of ecosystem investment and impact.



In response to BSO staff identifying a need for more professional development opportunities, NEI began a lunch and learn series for nonprofit staff to expand their knowledge on topics like access to capital, real estate for entrepreneurs, and AI usage.

They also launched MI Small Business Helper, a free digital platform connecting Southeast Michigan entrepreneurs and founders to trusted local resources, step-by-step guides, and programs, all in one easy-to-use place. This platform, powered by NEI and the Gilbert Family Foundation, has been an instrumental tool in connecting business owners to resources, with over 15,000 website visitors in its three months.

In addition to the online platform, NEI started a Small Business Social Hour series in partnership with City Institute. This free networking event takes place in a different neighborhood each month, exposing entrepreneurs, founders, support organizations, and community members to business districts across Wayne county. With the digital platform cultivating a pathway to success for business owners online and the networking events providing the ability to meet in-person with other like-minded individuals, NEI has created a well-rounded experience to foster a community for entrepreneurs and founders.

A November 2025 report by NEI and Detroit Future City identified persistent barriers facing growth-stage

businesses (those businesses that have moved past the initial startup phase and are experiencing sustained increases in revenue, customers, or scale), including limited access to flexible capital, difficulty navigating support resources, talent shortages, high technology costs, and complex government processes.

In response, NEI is expanding support for growth-stage companies and using these insights to guide targeted investments and improve ecosystem coordination. As MI Small Business Helper continues to grow, NEI aims to make it easier and faster for businesses to access the resources needed to scale.

With sustained and aligned investment, NEI can continue to serve as a trusted strategic intermediary, helping shape a more resilient, coordinated, and equitable entrepreneurial ecosystem across Southeast Michigan. In the years ahead, NEI will strategically work to:

Drive economic development for small businesses and entrepreneurs

Strengthen the ecosystem and build network capacity

Develop network resources for scaling small businesses

Enhance storytelling and communication

Expand small business policy and advocacy



new economy initiative

neweconomyinitiative.org

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NEI is a philanthropic collaboration and initiative of
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