



One Small Business at a Time

Building Economic Opportunity in America's Communities

Libraries propel entrepreneurship and economic opportunity across the United States. To research or brainstorm new ideas or markets, develop business plans, gain access to emerging technologies, leverage local business resources, and sustain an enterprise, the 123,000 libraries across the country are ideal partners. Libraries offer a cost-effective national network that can be leveraged to support both aspiring and existing business owners—including those not traditionally served by business support networks. To advance economic opportunity for all, we urge decision makers in the U.S. Small Business Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce, and other federal agencies; the White House; U.S. Congress; business-related associations, foundations and corporate philanthropy; think tanks; and other organizations to include libraries in their plans to promote and advance entrepreneurship and small business development.

Library support for small businesses

Nearly all public libraries offer baseline support for entrepreneurs by providing meeting spaces, public computers, and internet access, as well as access to e-books, magazines, and newspapers. Many libraries of all types offer introductory to advanced support such as locally relevant business start-up classes, market research help and database access, and guidance in

leveraging social media and other online tools. The LA Law Library (CA), for example, offers a class series to take budding entrepreneurs from business idea to business plan, and provides legal perspective on starting and operating a business. In Pennsylvania, small business

Takeaways for decision makers

- **Realizing economic opportunity for all** means heightened entrepreneurship and small business activity across the nation. How can such activity be promoted and supported cost effectively? One solution is libraries—123,000 strong—already present in communities across the United States.
- **Libraries have the information resources, technology, physical presence, and expert staff** to research and brainstorm new ideas or markets, develop business plans, gain access to or learn about emerging technologies, obtain information about intellectual property, and implement business plans and sustain an enterprise. Libraries help small business owners minimize risk and launch their ventures by offering online and community-based professional development classes, prototyping tools, connection to community resources, and marketing assistance.
- **Leverage libraries** in new policy initiatives to grow entrepreneurship and small business.

owners, including a beauty consultant, an artist, and a pet care specialist, that took part in the Bosler (PA) Memorial Library’s “Get Your Business Online” workshop learned how to use online tools to build a website and maximize web ads. These essential information resources, equipment, space, and services help to defray costs for budding entrepreneurs, leveling the entrepreneurial playing field. The St. Louis County (MO) Public Library, for one, estimates that their business databases and customized research expertise save small business owners \$13,000 each year.

Connecting entrepreneurs to community

Moving beyond their own walls, libraries play a critical role in connecting individuals seeking business support to a wider range of resources, including working with organizations such as Small Business Development Support Centers (SBDCs) and SCORE. The Community Library Network in Idaho, for one, partners with the North Idaho SBDC to offer workshops for start-ups such as “Starting a Business in Idaho.” In the workshop, participants were introduced to different ways of entering into business—such as buying an existing business, purchasing a franchise, or starting their own. Class topics included business structure, taxes, insurance, and mitigating risk. Libraries

partner with and refer community members to chambers of commerce, main street organizations, and other local groups, as well. In Independence (KS), the library provides paid memberships to the chamber of commerce as an incentive to individuals who complete the library’s self-paced business development program. The Broward County (FL) Library, in turn, partners with local co-working spaces to cross-promote entrepreneurship resources.

Libraries also connect entrepreneurs to each other, facilitating networking, peer learning, and mentoring. In the Richland (SC) Library’s Entrepreneur-in-Residence program, experienced local businesspeople are hired to offer one-to-one, customized support and business programming for newer entrepreneurs. The Santa Barbara (CA) Public Library offers weekly networking meetups in English and Spanish. And, the Appleton (WI) Public Library’s Entrepreneur Storytelling program gave

“We see hiring entrepreneurs as part of our mission. We’re investing in our own small business community by hiring them to work with us. We’ve also made lasting relationships.”

—Diane Luccy, Richland Library

underrepresented entrepreneurs a space to share their stories of success and challenge while building connections with the audience and cultivating a sense of community. These library efforts extend the reach and depth of business support available to startups, creating thriving entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Prototyping and pop-ups

Entrepreneurs can leverage library resources, classes, and tools to explore or test out a business idea before committing or investing in it. At the Laramie County (WY) Library

The American Library Association’s Libraries Build Business initiative (2020–2022), supported by google.org, partnered with 13 public libraries—ranging from large urban systems like Los Angeles Public Library to small rural entities like Topsham (ME) Public Library—to build library capacity in offering innovative programming and services to aspiring and existing small business owners and entrepreneurs. The 18-month program ultimately impacted 14,417 individuals who: participated in more than 1,210 classes and workshops; received one-on-one help; used makerspaces and other hands-on creation labs; and checked out equipment and other resources during the 18-month grant period. The initiative provided needed support to those typically underserved by and underrepresented in small business activity: **77% of project participant survey respondents were women; and 64% were Black, Indigenous, and people of color.**



The Baltimore County (MD) Public Library's popular Entrepreneurship Academy program provides classes on writing a business plan,



market research, financial recordkeeping and taxes, merchandising, pricing, and engaging with customers.

In response to community demand, the classes are available in English and Spanish and are offered in-person as well as online several times throughout the year. The library hosts a regular “Pop-up Shop” event for program participants and local entrepreneurs. The 2021 Small Business Day Pop-Up Shop hosted more than 60 vendors at three different branch libraries, and more than 400 customers visited the shops. The Pop-Up Shops are a fun way to help entrepreneurs build confidence and test out their ideas without investing in market fees or a brick-and-mortar location.

Serving underrepresented entrepreneurs

While entrepreneurship is a growing path to economic mobility, many individuals face barriers to access. Libraries help reach these demographics by offering targeted entrepreneurship programs and assistance for underserved groups. The Providence (RI) Public Library, for one, partners with the Rhode Island Hispanic Chamber of Commerce to offer free business education seminars for Spanish-speaking small business owners and can serve business owners in Spanish when needed. At Purdue University (IN) Libraries, business librarians work with veterans taking part in the Entrepreneurial Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities as they develop marketing plans and provide additional support by phone, email, and online, including access to relevant library databases and software. The Los Angeles Public Library worked with street vendors to develop mobile phone accessible self-paced courses to navigate business and safety concerns. Allen County (IN) and Orange County (FL) public libraries offer entrepreneurship programming targeted to teens and youth; the Norman (OK) High School Library Learning Commons includes a Maker Lab for students to engage. And, the Spokane County (WA) Library District's Small Business Boot Camp helped rural business owners with limited internet access build their business through training and micro-grants. By identifying local needs, libraries expand pathways toward economic opportunity for all. ■

Gwinnett County (GA) Public Library's New Start Entrepreneurship Incubator (NSEI) aims to serve community members who have spent time in prison or jail.

This population faces difficulties and stigma securing employment.

The NSEI program offers innovative supports such as peer learning, laptops and hotspots, one-on-one mentorship with mentors matched in terms of business interest areas, and an opportunity to secure start-up capital in a “Launchpad” pitch event with the local business community.



System's recording studio, for example, entrepreneurs can use cameras, greenscreens, lighting, and editing software to produce audio, video, and graphics; Cleveland (OH) Public Library's makerspace includes 3D printers, sewing machines, and laser engravers for hobbyists and entrepreneurs alike. These resources help minimize cost and risk for small business owners and make it possible for individuals to pursue their entrepreneurial visions. In addition, libraries offer access to capital through seed funding competitions in partnership with financial institutions and other partners. The Brooklyn (NY) Public Library and the Round Rock (TX) Public Library, for instance, offered pitch competitions for participants to pitch their ideas and win funding. For businesses ready to test and launch their products, the Central Arkansas Library System offers co-retail space in their River Shop at the library on Saturdays, and Middle Country (NY) Public Library offers annual small business expos, inviting emerging entrepreneurs to vend their wares and connect with prospective customers and clients.



About America's Libraries



The 123,000 libraries across the United States are a powerful force in addressing public policy priorities. Libraries advance **Education, Employment, Entrepreneurship, Empowerment, and Engagement for Everyone, Everywhere—The E's of Libraries®.**

The American Library Association (ALA) is the foremost national organization providing resources to inspire library and information professionals to transform their communities through essential programs and services. For more than 145 years, the ALA has been the trusted voice for academic, public, school, government, and special libraries, advocating for the profession and the library's role in enhancing learning and ensuring access to information for all.



ALA American Library Association

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