

PHASE 1 TAKEAWAYS

EQUITABLE ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEMS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES PILOT PROGRAM

Main Street America, in partnership with Forward Cities, and with support from the Kauffman Foundation, held 9 statewide workshops in 9 different states in 2023, as Phase 1 of our Equitable Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (E3) in Rural Communities pilot program. These are our top takeaways, specific to the learnings and experiences across those 9 workshops.

Acknowledge and Address Imbalances and Gaps in and on Your Main Street

Acknowledging imbalances and gaps in representation in and on your Main Street is the first step in taking action to fix those imbalances and gaps collectively and collaboratively. Main Streets, when thriving, create and represent places of welcoming and belonging for every single person and community in your town.

Language Translation is a First Step, not a Final Step in Inclusivity

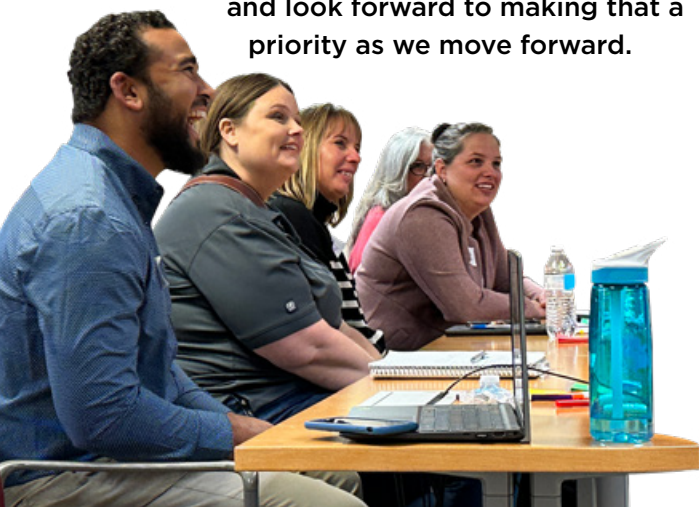
Providing multiple versions of your website, materials, resources, and tools to match the languages of your community and those you serve is a must and a first step, not a final step to inclusivity. We recognize that we have a lot of work to do at Main Street America to ensure our materials reflect the communities we serve and look forward to making that a priority as we move forward.

Support All Businesses and Entrepreneurs, Even If You Think They'll Fail

Creating and modeling a positive culture for aspiring and existing entrepreneurs is critical for a strong community support network. We've heard several stories about entrepreneurs hearing negative and condescending gossip and rumors about their business, or being told directly that their business is going to fail or is a waste of time. We should uplift and support small businesses in our communities and be prepared to speak up against negativity.



Want to Learn More about Phase 2?
Please contact Joi Austin at jaustin@mainstreet.org.



Resources and Programs Are Only Valuable When Used and Respected by Your Target Audience

It doesn't matter what resources or programs are offered, or how much time and money you've spent creating them, if your audience doesn't know about them or see enough value to use them or participate. It's critical to develop an outreach strategy and a plan on how to measure the impact and ROI of resources and programs to ensure they are needed and being utilized.

Genuine Relationships Come Before Services, Offers, and Resource Outreach

Outreach to communities, organizations, and people you want to develop partnerships with shouldn't be led with an ask, an offer, or an invitation. You first should focus on developing genuine and authentic relationships based on trust and understanding — and those kinds of relationships are developed over time and with great intention and vulnerability.

True Support Means Walking Alongside, Not Leading and Pulling Toward a Certain Direction

We can't emphasize enough the importance of building resources and programs with your audience, not for them. Begin with the understanding that ecosystem building IS organic and deeply collaborative. Every small business needs something different; we can't meet those needs if we go in with a prescriptive, solutions-first mindset. You can't begin with the answer. Sit within the problem and figure out which piece of the puzzle you can authentically provide. What does the cultivation process look like for businesses, and what are the hand-offs like when accessing resources from multiple organizations?

Gatekeeping and Power Dynamics Are Roadblocks in Ecosystem Building

Community leaders should act as conduits and collaborators. Economic opportunity programming is only as impactful and equitable as those representing and implementing it in our communities, and we must ensure that our work is accessible to and welcoming for all. Main Streets can't be for everyone if one person's vision is dominating the potential of an inclusive, equitable downtown.

Have the Best Understanding of What Success Can be in Your Community

Engage with your residents and visitors, know your market, and have a good understanding of your built environment so you can use data to work with businesses towards a pathway to success. Yes, small businesses are more likely to need the most guidance from the local permitting process to property development. Organizations can work together and communicate with businesses to build a pathway approach toward shared success.

Top Row: Social media shares and pictures from Nebraska, Washington and Minnesota programs. Bottom: Missouri attendees gather outside of the Governor's Office Building in Jefferson City, MO.

