



# **Developing Ecosystem Partnerships for Chicagoland Small Business Financial Readiness**

**Lessons learned and recommendations for future  
collaboration**

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## Introduction

Investments in ecosystem partnerships have the potential to significantly improve wealth-building and financial security for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs, benefiting local economies overall. While nonprofit business service organizations are crucial to this support, understanding the ideal collaborative conditions for serving small business owners is critical to improving best practices for organizations supporting Main Street entrepreneurs.

With support from the Chicago Community Trust Foundation's Fund for Equitable Business Growth, Small Business Majority launched three pilot programs (2019 through 2025) in partnership with nonprofit business service organizations (BSOs) Rogers Park Business Alliance (2019-2025), Working Credit (2019) and New Covenant Community Development Corporation (2020-2025) as part of Small Business Majority's Pathways to Entrepreneurial Growth (Pathways) program to improve financial readiness for Chicagoland small business owners. Over the course of the partnership, Small Business Majority's role in the program has intentionally evolved, first serving as the lead convener of the coalition, then participating in a direct service delivery model, and lastly focusing on strategic evaluation and storytelling.

In this evaluation phase, we assessed both medium and long-term outcomes of the Pathways program through a mixed method, semi-structured qualitative approach via 10 interviews with program participants via a focus group as well as one-on-one interviews to better understand the experiences of small business clients served through Pathways over the last seven years. Additionally, we conducted extensive interviews with our 2020-2025 program partners, Rogers Park Business Alliance and New Covenant Community Development Corporation, and internally with our own staff.

The following report provides a summary of Small Business Majority's research into the lessons learned during the partnership, recommendations to help inform future partnership and coalition building opportunities, and policy recommendations to support the Chicagoland small business ecosystem.

## Background

Small Business Majority recognizes that public policy shapes the fairness of systems influencing why people start and own small businesses. Through our work with Rogers Park Business Alliance (RPBA) and New Covenant Community Development Corporation (New Covenant), we have observed that people in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities often turn to entrepreneurship—whether full- or part-time—as a path to greater financial security.

In order to demonstrate how ecosystem partnerships can improve small business financial readiness, in 2026 Small Business Majority conducted medium and long-term qualitative research on three pilot programs the organization previously facilitated with RPBA, New Covenant and Working Credit NFP (WC) via focus groups and one-on-one interviews with staff and clients. Small Business Majority designed, launched and conducted interviews to determine the qualitative outcomes to better understand best practices of partnership and program dynamics. The pilot programs leveraged resources from across Small Business Majority, RPBA, New Covenant and WC to assess and build financial readiness for aspiring entrepreneurs by clients who either 1) received a bootcamp certificate, received free credit counseling, and engaged with RPBA and Small Business Majority; or, 2) were GROW graduates who also completed New Covenant's Business Financial Dashboard certificate course. RPBA is in the Rogers Park neighborhood on the Far North Side, while New Covenant is in North Lawndale on the West Side of Chicago. The partnership, now known as "FEBG North Partners," was initially supported by funders focused on serving business owners of color in these areas and later expanded to emphasize equitable business growth more broadly.

Pilot programs were launched in 2019, 2020 and 2021. Pilots 1 and 2 focused on the need for credit building counseling. The first pilot program, overseen by Small Business Majority and RBPA, was a one-session certificate bootcamp that was offered twice. In this first pilot, RPBA and Small Business Majority presented small business programs and resources, including a discount to enroll in RPBA's GROW certificate class—a multi-session program where aspiring small business owners are taken through the steps of how to start a business. It also integrated a presentation by WC and enrolled interested bootcamp participants in a one-year, free credit counseling program.<sup>1</sup> The partnership expected that many participants in the certificate program would enroll in the RPBA GROW program for start-ups. However, our partnership determined that this first pilot was not the most effective pathway to increase small business owner engagement with RPBA and the small business ecosystem as a whole. Although five people completed the free bootcamp and participated in free credit counseling—and all increased their scores from weak/fair to prime good/excellent—no clients applied to RPBA's GROW program, and only two contacted RPBA advisors for no-cost guidance and referral, one of which was an existing client of RPBA.

*“After taking the bootcamp, getting credit counseling, and getting help from Rogers Park Business Alliance whenever I had questions, I’ve had no more credit challenges in the last five years. I learned how to negotiate with my credit card companies before making large purchases and manage my cash flow to pay back the debt, so my credit score is maintained. I don’t want to be working at Walmart at \$10 an hour when I retire, like I see a lot of seniors. This experience will help me keep this business going and provide more money when I retire from my full-time job.” – Tim D., entrepreneur*

As the first pilot did not sufficiently demonstrate how BSO ecosystem partnerships build financial readiness for small business operations, the partnership developed a second pilot. At this stage, Small Business Majority introduced New Covenant Community Development Corporation (New Covenant) to RPBA as a complementary partner, providing advanced training on small business financial statements for entrepreneurs who completed the GROW program. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the shift to a virtual learning environment, the partnership also discontinued the bootcamp model and integrated WC and Small Business Majority's content directly into RPBA's GROW certificate program. It's important to

note that at this time, the entire education and coaching delivery model within the small business ecosystem changed dramatically as a result of the pandemic, and the partnership adapted its methods to meet the needs of aspiring entrepreneurs.

As part of a new multi-session course delivered by RPBA staff in 2021, WC delivered a credit session to participants and enrolled interested individuals in free credit building counseling. Later in the curriculum, Small Business Majority presented on access to capital, why credit matters, predatory lending and our Venturize.org resource portal. The course also promoted New Covenant's Business Financial Dashboard certificate course that would be offered at no cost to interested GROW certificate graduates. In the end, there were seven participants in the second pilot. Of those participants, only two people signed up for both free credit counseling and New Covenant's Business Financial Dashboard certificate course and thus, did not meet the partnership goal to have at least four participants to be incentivized in this pathway.

*“The bootcamp and credit counseling made a 2 to a 10 difference for me. Business and personal finance go hand-in-hand 100%, and they should teach personal finance in elementary and high school.” — Antoine S., entrepreneur*

Partners surmised that most GROW participants in this second pilot did not enroll either in credit counseling or New Covenant's certificate course due to the many challenges stemming from the pandemic, as well as small business owners' time and learning capacity limitations.

Therefore, in 2021 our partnership pivoted again to address the current learning needs of aspiring business owners resulting from the pandemic. We determined to reduce the partnership coalition to the three organizations of Small Business Majority, RPBA and New Covenant, especially since WC was no longer in a position to provide free credit building counseling. We also implemented a hybrid virtual and in-person module that responded to the needs of program participants in a post-covid learning environment. Hence, we started this third pilot iteration by focusing on RPBA's GROW class—with Small Business Majority continuing to present on capital and credit at one GROW session online. New Covenant was invited to describe their Business Financial Dashboard program to GROW participants and to welcome them to register for that hybrid class in order to strengthen a pathway from RPBA to New Covenant. Additionally, participants were reminded to access free business counseling and business resource navigation from all three organizations.

This third pilot became a successful and permanent ecosystem partnership pathway, and it continues to successfully serve participants today with a significant number of GROW graduates enrolled in New Covenant's Business Financial Dashboard certificate. After four years of this iteration of the partnership, Small Business Majority's role has evolved to serving more as an ecosystem assessment partner and a policy and advocacy advisor, rather than a direct service provider.

The ecosystem partnership brokered and established by Small Business Majority created the strongest financial readiness pathway from the RPBA GROW certificate program to New Covenant's Business Financial Dashboard certificate course.

*“The GROW program definitely got me to think about money in a different way, so that when I went to New Covenant, I was able to increase financial literacy from the course with regular one-on-one coaching.” — Jesus S., entrepreneur*

# Key findings from partners and recommendations for successful ecosystem partnerships

## Lessons learned

Through this partnership, we learned that it is essential to build coalitions with a commitment to providing services in a manner that meets people where they are. For example, this includes providing training, education and counseling during hours conducive to people who have full-time jobs. BSOs in this partnership have shared that it is not unusual to see clients who have more than one job and are interested in starting a business to create better financial security.

Additionally, we learned that partnerships greatly enhance financial readiness training for business owners by leveraging and expanding already successful program resources. In this partnership, success was marked by clients reporting the following outcomes:

- They were able to cut costs and save money.
- They were able to secure capital or a line of credit.
- They improved their FICO credit scores to prime level.
- They grew their self-confidence by understanding business financials to make more informed business decisions.

Not only did we find that participants' financial wellness was improved, but we also learned that our partnership had an indirect, significant impact on improving the mental health of clients by helping to decrease uncertainty, anxiety and stress.

*"I'm less stressful about understanding money because I've decreased the level of uncertainty and anxiousness that comes with being uncertain in what the numbers mean on paper." – Shanice J., BSO client*

Financial readiness partnerships are most effective when organizational programs complement one another as stepping stones to business development, and when counseling gives clients a clear sense of direction through realistic guidance and skills training on navigating the financial aspects of starting a business. For example, the GROW program introduced foundational concepts around capital, credit access and building a revenue-generating business. New Covenant then built on this foundation with more in-depth training on how financial statements, expenses, and cash flow inform business planning.

We also found that partnership pathways work best when each BSO's staff have dedicated time to offer free advising and coaching outside of scheduled sessions.

*"My world definitely opened up. I had so much that I learned and used, such as with my other business, which is running an Airbnb part-time." – Soraya S., entrepreneur*

## Successful characteristics of BSO business coaching and training

BSO coaching and business counseling requires a unique skillset that includes having empathy and patience for adults who are learning new skills. Small business owners were extremely vocal and expressed sincere thanks for the great amount of support, time and coaching they received from both RPBA and New Covenant.

Attendees attributed their positive experiences with RPBA and New Covenant staff to the following:

- Treating clients as capable adults with full lives, recognizing they are balancing work, family and other responsibilities
- Demonstrating patience and empathy by dedicating as much time as needed to support clients
- Communicating candidly and with compassion
- Building trust that allowed for open, honest conversations and enabled small business owners to make informed, unbiased decisions
- Fostering self-accountability and self-awareness by serving as both knowledgeable peers and accountability coaches
- Encouraging small business owners to stay realistic and focused on their goals, helping them avoid unnecessary work that falls outside their vision and business plan
- Helping clients maintain perspective and positivity, particularly during moments of self-doubt or discouragement
- Providing honest, motivating guidance when business owners felt disappointed or when faced with emotionally difficult decisions
- Reinforcing financial concepts and skills through varied, engaging and challenging exercises that ensured comprehension and practical application
- Practicing cultural competency by acknowledging the diverse backgrounds of small business owners and their target markets, and proactively seeking support from ecosystem partners when staff lacked relevant experience
- Connecting clients to free or low-cost legal, accounting and other professional services through trusted ecosystem partnerships

Likewise, participants expressed deep appreciation that the BSOs provided in-class training and homework opportunities to practice their financial management skills, all while cultivating an active “support accountability” for BSO staff to help people build a comfort level to work with numbers.

*“On the nights you’re in class with New Covenant and you see how much time the staff takes to work with you, it makes you appreciate the level of commitment that they have towards the program where they’re just not sounding off to people who just sit there. They care and expect you to be engaged and learn to be successful.” – Jesus S., entrepreneur*

*“I always had this barrier with numbers and financial stuff, and the New Covenant training demystified financials for me.” – Soraya S., entrepreneur*

## Foundations for effective ecosystem partnerships

Through the three pilot programs and interviews with partners, we have developed a checklist to help ensure successful ecosystem partnership.

- Before forming a partnership, have open discussions with prospective partners about the feasibility of launching and scaling a successful partnership, given each organization's current workload, staffing and funding.
- The lead organization in the ecosystem coalition should commit to organizing core partners, facilitating information sharing and providing the means for partners to share resources, files and notes.
- Regular partnership meetings are essential to the planning and implementation phases. All partners must invest in scheduling time for relationship building, especially when bridging new relationships between organizations, and should map out the following.
  - Ensure each organization understands the shared goal of the partnership as well as each other's missions.
  - Build trust by discussing and documenting agreements on administrative leadership and clarifying how each organization will contribute time and information to support the lead partner.
  - Create shared accountability by documenting roles, timelines, staff assignments and responsibilities, and resource sharing.
  - Establish an agreed-upon process for how to address conflict, differing ideas and concerns.
- BSO staff in ecosystem partnerships should possess strong relationship management, negotiation, communication and conflict resolution skills.
- Core partners should agree to mutually promote one another's services, particularly when the partnership includes non-BSO service providers. For example, when collaborating with a non-BSO partner on ancillary services such as credit building, the partnership should formalize practices that ensure clients are continuously connected back to BSO entrepreneurial services — otherwise, there is no clear pathway for potential entrepreneurs to re-engage with BSOs for business development support.
- Prospective partnerships should not be transactional in nature. Organizations considering joining an established partnership should play an active role in supporting fundraising efforts that enable their participation, and strive to maintain their involvement beyond standalone activities.
- Designate a project manager at one of the partner organizations to serve as the central point of coordination for the partnership. This person should check in regularly with all partners to ensure planned activities—both among partners and funders—are on track, and document any changes in direction, the rationale for those changes and confirmation that all partners agree.
- Consider conducting a brief annual train-the-trainer session for staff across all partner organizations to foster a shared understanding of each partner's work and reinforce a spirit of organizational collaboration.

## Small business client results in the Pathways program

Through feedback collected from previous program participants, we learned how the joint programming enabled them to increase their knowledge and applied skills on financial management and business planning, which noticeably enhanced their access to capital and ability to adapt their business plans, as informed by the numbers.

*The bootcamp had an approachable presentation style. When you go online, there's all these sites and checklists, but you have to filter the information and piecemeal what you find online to learn all on your own. It was surprising how well the bootcamp was laid out in the steps of starting a business. I left feeling confident knowing about the resources available because I met people, and I didn't learn alone. I left feeling supported." – Antoine S., entrepreneur*

- Credit building and debt management are essential financial skills best introduced before or early in the process of starting a business, ideally while clients are already participating in a BSO cohort. Learning alongside peers creates a supportive environment that encourages attendance and engagement, as participants feel motivated by others who share similar questions and challenges.

*"APR disclosure I find helpful, after the credit counseling. I got out of debt and got better credit offers for cards. Small business owners should receive the APR from non-banks." – Tim D., entrepreneur*

- The partnership improved financial resilience and business plan management. All clients interviewed reported a stronger understanding of, and comfort with, working with financial data. Attendees noted they were able to cut costs and reduce expenses, which contributed to greater bankability and improved access to capital when needed.
- Small business owners widely credited the New Covenant's Business Financial Dashboard certificate course with having an impact beyond their businesses. Participants reported applying the concepts to their personal finances, making better consumer and household financial decisions and becoming more effective leaders on the boards they serve.
- Negative economic conditions are key drivers for why clients sought to become entrepreneurs and enrolled in the partnership trainings:
  - unemployment; underemployment; student loan debt from college or training programs; inadequate retirement savings; the need for flexible income while providing unpaid caregiving, particularly given that most full-time employment does not accommodate caregiving responsibilities and paid leave is not universal

*"When I was in start-up mode for my business, at that time I was also a caregiver for my brother in a nursing home, his legal guardian and I was coordinating everything. It took time to coordinate all that. If I had a job, I would have been fired. By having my own business, I was able to take care of him, and my business grew 20% every year on average." – Nancye R., entrepreneur*

- Rising costs, particularly for healthcare and childcare, created unsustainable conditions for some small business owners. One participant reported that these financial pressures, combined with student loan obligations and family expenses, ultimately made it impossible for them to keep their business open.

*"We closed the business because of student loans. I have an older daughter who was preparing for college, and we had babies on the way. When healthcare and childcare are up, they also*

*pull up on you and there's a domino effect where you can't sustain a business.” – Antoine S., entrepreneur*

- Clients noted that this ecosystem program pathway helped them better understand the distinctions between operating a business that is a non-profit versus a for-profit business.
- Clients' positive experiences in the GROW certificate program were a key factor in their decision to enroll in the no-cost New Covenant's Business Financial Dashboard certificate course. Exposure to New Covenant's program during a GROW session, including a visit by New Covenant's Executive Director, signaled that they could expect the same quality of interactive, skills-based learning and engaging guest speakers.

*“I took GROW once and the financial dashboard course twice. With RPBA GROW class as a foundation, I changed my idea process many times with their help. Then, New Covenant gave me insight of what the business looks like from a financial point of view.” – Shanice J., BSO client*

*“I took the classes to know more about entrepreneurship when I first started. Every year I signed up at Rogers Park to take classes. New Covenant was great because most people don't understand numbers. I kept coming back. You have to be surrounded by this language of finance and business, or it will remain a hobby and you'll make a lot of mistakes. Now I have employees and a successful business.” – Nancye R., entrepreneur*

#### **Client results from New Covenant's Business Financial Dashboard Certificate Course:**

Participants reflected that before the Business Financial Dashboard certificate course, they had significantly underestimated the importance of understanding and managing business finances—a gap that directly affects a business's ability to survive. In-class exercises and case studies reinforced a critical lesson: businesses often fail because business owners are not closely monitoring their finances.

Clients expressed deep gratitude for New Covenant's role in introducing them to financial management concepts and building both the skills and confidence needed to work with budgets, balance sheets, income statements and cash flow statements. Successful outcomes identified by participants included:

- Gaining an understanding of business financials helped clients to build confidence and increase their motivation to finish and earn the certificate.
- Learning how to prioritize cost liabilities and cut expenditures to invest savings elsewhere in their business had saved them money
- Applying learned skills helped to improve their personal finances and their professional life, for example, cancelling tech and entertainment subscription services or more effectively fulfilling fiduciary responsibilities as board members.
- Developing a stronger grasp of how to price their time, services and products built financial management confidence, particularly among women business owners.

*“I matured in a way that I never would have before. I have a foundation to understand the financials to make better decisions, even with my Airbnb business.” – Soraya S., entrepreneur*

*“Personally, and for my career, I found that understanding financial statements helped me as the treasurer of my condominium board. It also decreased my anxiety on finance and numbers.” – Shanice J., BSO client and aspiring business owner*

**Client results on their executive skills utilized for success:** After completing the Pathways program, one participant noted that success is "1% passion and 99% showing up"—requiring persistence and a consistent commitment to learning and applying new skills. As working adults, participants emphasized that completing both certificate programs demands intentional follow-through on scheduled learning and assigned homework.

Enrolling in these courses also means balancing work, family and possibly other academic commitments. The organizational and self-management abilities needed to navigate these demands are known as executive skills. Participants identified the following executive skills as integral to completing the courses, achieving financial readiness and building the resilience needed to be a small business owner:

- **Perseverance and persistence:** Showing up to class, participating in exercises and doing homework. A couple of people said their attention and focus skills from college and graduate school were helpful in processing the amount of information and skills taught.
- **Task initiation and task completion:** Starting, following through, and completing tasks efficiently, especially when provided with hands-on assistance and business coaching.
- **Metacognition/self-monitoring:** Being self-aware and accepting one's abilities and having the humility to understand both your weaknesses and strengths.
- **Planning and prioritization:** Setting goals, adjusting priorities, and taking the necessary steps to complete goals, knowing you have the support of BSO staff to help keep you accountable.
- **Impulse control:** Pausing to think before reacting and making rash decisions. Learning to remove emotions from decision making, especially when the numbers are not favorable to one's creative vision or original plan.
- **Flexibility:** Being prepared to adapt to unforeseen challenges.
- **Communication:** Dealing with different customer personalities, how to negotiate for prices and cultivating relationship management skills, particularly with business communication skills.
- **Attention to detail:** Fostering observational skills with numbers to be precise or to catch errors.

*"Having had to spend time earning my bachelors and masters gave me experienced practice to stick through learning in school with much information, so that helped me pay attention in class." — Hadiya S., entrepreneur*

*"It's acceptance to understanding that there are things you don't know that you don't know, and that you just need to stay close." — Soraya S., entrepreneur*

**Client Feedback - Improving BSO content and service delivery for the financial readiness pathway:** When the focus group was asked to look back at their learning experience on either what they felt was missing, or what training they feel they need now, there were three marked observations:

1. All participants were unaware they could return and call the BSOs anytime for free business counseling; some mistakenly thought the free business counseling was conditional upon taking a class, or thought they were not "eligible" if they moved neighborhoods in Chicagoland area
2. All participants want a refresher financial dashboard class, plus the option of taking a next level financial class
3. All participants want hands-on coaching workshops on how to manage relationships with customers, bankers and lawyers with in-person or online role playing, scripts and prompts, as

related to their business financials and what the numbers mean when talking about their business

*“I want to ask if I can come back, because I’ve always had the impression that there’s a cut off in terms of how long you can access the mentoring through New Covenant.” – Shanice J., BSO client and aspiring business owner (also echoed by all in the focus group)*

The following are business owner recommendations for additional business development content they would like BSOs to offer, complementing and reinforcing their financial readiness training:

- **Strengthen post-program follow-up** by developing systems to track and re-engage certificate graduates and proactively communicate that free BSO advisement is available without requiring class enrollment.
  - Partner with other organizations to offer training on capital strategy, including role-playing on approaching and navigating traditional lenders, an overview of different types of lenders, and tools such as scripts, prompts and the opportunity to craft one-minute lender pitches. Business owners reported disappointing experiences when completing a homework exercise that required visiting a traditional bank, underscoring the need for more structured preparation.

*Note: Business owners who received credit-building counseling found that the scripts and prompts provided were effective when communicating with creditors and felt similar tools would be valuable for lender interactions.*
  - Scripts and prompts related to capital navigation and legal assistance could be provided by a workshop via the City of Chicago’s Capital Solutions-designated Neighborhood Business Development Center grantees and similar centers in Greater Chicagoland, as well as other groups that provide free legal counseling for small business owners.
- **Offer post-graduation learning opportunities**, such as an in-person refresher session or an advanced course covering both business development and financial management.<sup>ii</sup>
- **Develop a workshop on working with legal professionals**, including scripts and prompts on what to say, ask and share when engaging with a lawyer. Since many business owners have never worked with an attorney, providing guided practice with both pro-bono and for-fee lawyers would be particularly valuable.
- **Offer a workshop on customer acquisition and revenue growth** for business owners who have completed both the GROW and New Covenant Business Financial Dashboard certificate programs. This should include guidance on how to interpret and manage cash flow and expenditures when evaluating marketing and customer acquisition costs and help business owners understand how their financials should inform decisions about investing in strategies to increase sales and revenue.

*“I’d like to have had more coaching in start-up businesses and how to navigate relationships, who to call, what to say, ask, and do.” – Shanice J., BSO client*

*It seems very crucial to have the option to take the courses again because they are so welcoming for beginners, who are in the stage of business where you’re easily discouraged.” – Hadiya S., entrepreneur*

## Small Business Majority Recommendations: Managing ecosystem partnerships to support diverse clients, especially in under-resourced neighborhoods

### *Recommendations for business service organizations*

- Explore partnerships with non-BSO wraparound service providers, particularly in the following areas:
  - **Workforce development and career coaching** to strengthen clients' executive and soft skills, particularly for those whose life experiences have been shaped by structural barriers that limit opportunities to develop these skills.
  - **Mental health and wellness services** to support the wellbeing of socioeconomically disadvantaged clients, who often face greater mental health challenges. Business owners who reported improved resilience after completing the Business Financial Dashboard certificate course noted greater mental clarity and reduced anxiety in making financial decisions, and several took the initiative to pursue stress management practices such as mindful meditation and yoga.
- BSOs that offer online resources or virtual-only training should actively promote their in-person advising services through those same channels. Direct, live support helps clients feel connected, builds trust with the BSO and strengthens business skills in ways that virtual engagement alone may not.
- When staff lack experience reaching diverse customer markets, BSOs should proactively seek guidance from ecosystem peers to address that gap and connect small business owners with partners who can better support their needs.
- Philanthropic, local government and state funders of economic empowerment grants and the like should collaborate with one another to gain a collective understanding of their grantees, so as to cross-fertilize efforts regionally and state-wide. This is especially important since a subset of grantees already receive funding from multiple sources, which can limit alignment and impact across the small business ecosystem.

### *Recommendations for policy and advocacy partners*

- Advocate for laws that protect small businesses and consumers against predatory lending products that fail to disclose APR and all financing terms, which disproportionately target populations in disadvantaged economic areas.
- Collect stories and advocate for improved small business benefits (e.g., paid family and medical leave, affordable health insurance, and affordable childcare and adult care) so small business owners don't have to choose between keeping their business open and supporting their families and employees.
- Create resources for BSOs and small business clients explaining how federal and state policies directly affect resource providers and small business owners.

### *Funders and Stakeholder Donors to Ecosystem Partnerships and the Organizations in the Partnership*

- Funders should stay informed on BSO field learnings and remain open to understanding how place-based partnerships can vary significantly based on local culture, community context, staffing and available resources.
- BSO funders should refrain from pitching BSOs on costly products and resources that may not meet their needs. Most BSOs are 501(c)(3) nonprofits operating on lean budgets, and recommendations that are expensive, incompatible with existing program content, administrative

processes or technology systems, or offered by for-profit and out-of-state organizations unfamiliar with local community needs can place BSOs in an uncomfortable position—particularly given that many BSOs are primarily focused on serving socioeconomically disadvantaged small business owners in their local communities.

- Funders in the economic development and healthcare spaces—particularly those focused on mental and behavioral health—should explore joint investments in financial readiness partnership models. Our model suggests that building business financial skills correlates with improved mental health and wellness outcomes, making this a compelling area for cross-sector collaboration and innovation.
- Funders should work alongside BSOs to help them identify and invest in affordable technology to cost-share in a way that would reduce nonprofit staff administrative workload on several grants. BSOs serve over 600 individuals, on average, so identifying and leveraging tools to help alleviate burnout is paramount to ensuring BSOs can provide economic services to Main Street businesses long-term (e.g., use of AI in sending mass emails, lists, mail merges for different purposes and different clients, and other administrative tasks).
  - More specifically, funders should consider providing additional grant dollars to BSO collaboratives that are interested in cost-sharing affordable technology for mass-send mobile-phone text technology platforms as another attempt to re-connect with former clients who have opted out of receiving the BSO’s email communications.
- Funders' success indicators are sometimes misaligned with those of the BSOs they fund. For BSOs, success extends beyond objective, aggregate outputs such as the number of businesses established, capital accessed or jobs created. The individual impact is more difficult to quantify, such as building financial readiness and resilience, and it also carries significant and lasting value.
  - For example, funders and stakeholders should understand that a successful BSO outcome can include a client deciding not to pursue small business ownership after receiving counseling and completing coursework. If the broader goal is to help people build wealth and financial security, a client who concludes that small business ownership is too demanding of their time and savings has still benefited, and the BSO has helped them preserve their assets and make an informed financial decision.

*“I just wanted to thank you for doing this focus group. The programs are incredibly beneficial and is a great service for people, especially people of color that may not have access to this type of resource. It definitely brings all of what may seem daunting down to a learning level where you're able to come to terms with things that you might not have understood before coming to RPBA and New Covenant. I really appreciate it, and I hope that it continues.”*

*— Jesus S., entrepreneur*

# Attachment 1: Methodology

## Focus Groups and One-on-One Interview Questions

Small Business Majority conducted two 60-minute focus groups and six 30-minute key informant interviews through an online format. The focus group and one-on-one interview questions were used in a semi-structured, open-ended interview format, via the following:

- One focus group of four BSO clients from the RPBA/SBM to New Covenant pathway
- A one-on-one interview with an entrepreneur client from the RPBA/SBM to New Covenant pathway
- Two one-on-one interviews with entrepreneur clients from the SBM/RPBA bootcamp to WC credit counseling pathway
- One focus group of two BSO staff from RPBA
- A one-on-one interview with one staffer from New Covenant and two staff from SBM

The following questions were utilized. These questions may also be used as a blueprint by other business service organizations to assess their mid-term and long-term outcomes through an ecosystem partnership.

### A. Focus Group Questions with BSO Clients

1. Looking back to when you took these two classes and earned certificates, what's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of these two trainings together?
2. How did these two trainings help you personally or professionally?
3. What was your inspiration after graduating from the GROW program to continue and get the financial dashboard certificate through our partner New Covenant?
4. What was most surprising to learn from the experience, the one thing that you found surprising, or that you found out your idea of it or definition wasn't what you thought?
5. Can you tell me about a time when things didn't go the way you had hoped or expected for your business journey and how these two classes helped you bounce back?
6. What's the one thing that made you stick through and graduate from NCCDC after GROW?
7. How has your mental clarity changed about your skills in managing financials and numbers, which for a lot of people can cause very high stress?
8. Compared to two years ago, do you feel more confident or less confident managing your mental stress related to money and affordability overall?
9. Planning, time management, organization, working memory, resilience, task starting, finishing, negotiation, stress management, self-awareness. These are all examples of executive skills. How have these executive skills changed since you took both classes: skills of planning, time management, attention, task starting and finishing, negotiation, stress management, flexibility?
10. In hindsight, what parts of the training felt irrelevant, or what do you feel is missing that you later discovered you also needed to know?
11. Would any of you want to take the dashboard class again, or a light refresher version?
12. Before we close, is there anybody else who wants to share anything on what you're able to do now that you couldn't do before, or any other insights?
13. Is there anything else anyone would like to share?

## B. One-on-one interview questions with BSO Clients

1. What was your goal at that time for starting or growing your business by coming to the free business bootcamp? (*find out context*)
2. What was happening in your life when you took the free bootcamp, got your bootcamp certificate and then took advantage of free credit counseling? (*find out context*)
3. How did the free bootcamp and the free credit counseling help you make sense of what was happening in your life and business goals or ideas at the time? (*reveals what was most surprising, resilience, coping, and/or identity components*)
4. Were there any responsibilities or financial challenges you were experiencing that changed your mind about moving forward with your business interest, such as other expenses related to housing, healthcare, savings or family responsibilities? (*reveals what was most surprising, resilience, coping, and/or identity components*).
5. What specifically happened after taking the bootcamp and the credit counseling that helped you shift direction for your entrepreneurship journey and see it differently than before you took these two free trainings? (*identify why the pathway project was the best solution*)
6. Was there a moment, conversation, or realization that became a turning point, or “ah-ha moment?” (*identify why the pathway project was the best solution*)
7. How did the bootcamp and credit counseling play a role, if at all? (*identify whether our organizations played a role, if at all*)
8. What other things helped you make decisions for your financial situation at the time? (*identify did our organizations play a role, if at all*)
9. What’s meaningful about where you are now versus back then? (*capture the difference between before and after*)
10. Looking back at your mental clarity before you took the free bootcamp and free credit counseling, how do you feel about your business financials and financial readiness overall compared to before you came? (*capture impact of the depth change for the story*)
11. [State their name], is there anything we didn’t talk about that feels important for this story? (closing)

### **Facilitator prompts**

Ensure comfort

- “You should share only what you’re comfortable with.”
- Introductory icebreaker for focus group: say name and favorite topping on a pizza

Validate the experience without judgment

- “Thank you for sharing that.”
- “It makes sense you felt that way.”
- “That’s understandable”

## **C. Partnership Staff Interview Questions with Small Business Majority, RPBA, and New Covenant**

Used in staff focus group and one-on-one interview

1. Tell me about how the partnership helped your organization identify solutions and expanded your impact that was better than when you were working as an organization individually? How did this partnership strengthen services, outreach and programs, counseling?
2. How did you feel about the defined roles and responsibilities that were shared among the partners?
3. Tell me how your organization has benefited from this program to enhance its capacity, resources, knowledge, programs, outreach, people served, networks and access to you (referrals, funding, focus, etc.).
4. How do you feel this partnership has resulted in a common vision for the partnership?
5. In what ways has the project created a more sustainable and formalized system of referrals among partnering agencies? Tell me how you feel about that.
6. How have the communities that the partnership served benefitted? What about other partnerships you have outside of this pilot pathway, how did they benefit?
7. What are the lessons learned that you do differently now, when participating in ecosystem coalition partnerships moving forward?

## Attachment 2: Ecosystem Partnership Short-term Goals and Outcomes

### Partnership Pilot #1: Theory of Change

If we leverage our resources and staff to expose people to start-up 101 concepts, credit and access to capital and avoiding predatory lending through a three-hour bootcamp, as well as provide optional free credit building to boost financial readiness, then they will be more likely to have increased engagement with the BSO ecosystem and more financially ready as they start-up their business.

*Partners:* Small Business Majority, RPBA, WC

Short-term goals:

- Increase awareness of the importance of FICO score credit in seeking capital and present on credit related to how it affects financial management and capital access (WC).
- Complement Small Business Majority presenting on access to capital, navigating debt and equity capital plus predatory capital with a WC interactive presentation on credit.
- Walk people through in detail the preferred order of how, why and when on paperwork and systems to establish their business; not only provide a list of what to do, but how and when it's best to act. This is in response to BSO staff seeing how people doing things “out of order” when starting a business can affect their financials, profits and ability to get capital to grow and build customers and revenues.
  - Small Business Majority and RPBA presented not only on what incorporating is, but also walked them through the correct steps of when, when to incorporate, when to get a FEIN number, and when to get a bank account—not just what to do—but when to take action steps. Filing and organizational systems were discussed. Anecdotes from colleagues who themselves work for BSOs and tried to understand the process helped to inform our partnership that advising when and how to take those steps needed to be emphasized (i.e., establish a separate bank account *after* getting business EIN number, structure establishment and name of either sole proprietorship, llc, s-corp, etc. etc.)

Short-term outcomes:

- Positive feedback on Small Business Majority/RPBA bootcamp
- Increased awareness of how credit scores can impact access to capital
- 100% of bootcamp participants strongly agreed that they learned the basics on how to start/grow a business with a financial emphasis
- No small business owners enrolled in GROW from the bootcamp; three business owners continued to engage with RPBA for ad hoc business advisement.
- Three clients received a line of credit within nine months of the bootcamp

## Partnership Pilot #2 (modified): Theory of Change

If we leverage our partnership and utilize the GROW cohort of classes in order to expose people to start-up 101 concepts, business planning, credit building, and access to capital and avoiding predatory lending- while also offering free credit building counseling and discounted or free enrollment in Business Financial Dashboard certificate course, then we will have engage more than half the GROW class in the small business ecosystem to increase their financial readiness in their start-up actions with a financially feasible business plan, while knowing how to better navigate and/or access capital.

*Partners:* Small Business Majority, RPBA, WC, New Covenant

Short-term goals within one year from follow-up with partners and post-class survey:

- Utilize RPBA's 8-week GROW program to integrate WC's 's credit counseling training and Small Business Majority's access to capital presentations as stand-alone classes to expose participants to the importance of credit and capital for their business start-up, while training them on navigating access to capital, debt and equity capital plus predatory capital.
- Increase enrollment in free WC credit building counseling.
- Expose the GROW cohort to New Covenant as an ecosystem partner.
- Enroll a significant number of current GROW clients, as well as past GROW certificate earners, in New Covenant's Business Financial Dashboard certificate course on business financials offered at no cost (partnership grant covered administrative and admission cost per person).

Short-term outcomes within one year from follow-up with partners and post-class survey:

- 100% positive feedback on Small Business Majority's presentation about navigating access to capital and avoiding predatory lending
- Only two people in this pilot who were current GROW clients enrolled in New Covenant's Business Financial Dashboard certificate course as well as free credit counseling, so not a significant number as the partnership planned
- Higher rate of enrollment in New Covenant Business Financial Dashboard certificate course by previous GROW graduates versus current GROW participants.

## Partnership Pilot #3 (modified): Theory of Change

If we leverage our partnership to expose small business owners to start-up 101 concepts, credit and access to capital and avoiding predatory lending; offer free enrollment in business financial dashboard certificate course; and invite a guest speaker for a QuickBooks overview, then start-up participants will boost their financial readiness by being able to read, understand and translate business financial statements in relation to carrying out their business plan activities, including seeking capital and credit.

*Partners:* Small Business Majority, RPBA, New Covenant

Short-term goals within one year from follow-up with partners and post-class survey:

- Integrate Small Business Majority's access to capital presentations as stand-alone classes in the GROW eight-week training class to expose participants to the importance of credit and capital for their business start-up, while training them on navigating access to capital, debt and equity capital plus predatory capital.

- Small Business Majority and RPBA to increase awareness of the importance of FICO score credit in seeking capital and present on credit purpose related to how it affects financial management and capital access.
- Expose RPBA's GROW cohort to New Covenant's Business Financial Dashboard as an ecosystem partner.
- Create a higher rate of participation than the previous pilot in New Covenant's Business Financial Dashboard course by 1) encouraging enrollment by a significant number of current GROW participants; and 2) inviting past GROW certificate earners, offered at no-cost as part of the FEBG funded Pathways program.
- Provide clients in the Business Financial Dashboard class with an overview of how robust accounting software will help manage their financials and invite a guest speaker to provide an overview of QuickBooks, as supplementary to the Business Financial Dashboard concepts learned, and to coordinate by lead partner Small Business Majority.

Short-term outcomes:

- 100% positive feedback on Small Business Majority's presentation in GROW and during the Business Financial Dashboard course
- Noticeably higher rate of interested enrollment in New Covenant's Business Financial Dashboard certificate course than by previous RPBA GROW graduates.
- 100% positive feedback on Business Financial Dashboard training, including how an accounting software can help them. In this case a QuickBooks presentation by a guest speaker
- Stronger partner relationships between RPBA and New Covenant regarding individual clients and their progress
- 100% completion of Business Financial Dashboard class by GROW certificate holders

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**Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> Free credit counseling provided by Working Credit NFP (WC) was made possible through grant funding that supported WC's ability to offer counseling services broadly, not exclusively to clients within this ecosystem partnership.

<sup>ii</sup> During the focus group, Small Business Majority and New Covenant staff conveyed that there will be a Business Financial Dashboard 2.0 class and GROW 2.0 classes available soon.