

Comprehensive Community Development

CASE STUDY

Getting Smarter in Building Community Entrepreneurship

BEYOND HOUSING



CCD PRINCIPLES HIGHLIGHTED:



INTENTIONAL
APPROACH



COMMUNITY
DRIVEN



LAYERED
STRATEGIES



GUIDING
VISION & PLAN



STRATEGIC
PARTNERSHIPS



COORDINATED
LEADERSHIP



LAYERED
INVESTMENT

KEY INSIGHTS

- The Biz Smart Start program provided the tools and resources to empower nine business owners in its inaugural class and a second cohort in 2024 to launch and grow their businesses.
- Several participants demonstrated the program's effectiveness in fostering economic growth by securing contracts and new facilities.
- The program's success helps set a foundation for sustainable local development, working toward Beyond Housing's strategic goal of creating vibrant commercial corridors that enhance local commerce, generate jobs, and retain wealth within the community.

Empowering Entrepreneurs for Community Transformation

For years, under-resourced communities in St. Louis had expressed a desire for improved workforce development that could help transform their future trajectory. In response, Beyond Housing, a St. Louis-based community development organization, took action. In 2022, they implemented a targeted workforce development strategy and worked with Tabatha Kittrell, then a NeighborWorks America VISTA, to lead a community assessment. They knew that nurturing a thriving entrepreneurial environment can help revitalize communities by creating opportunities for area residents and attracting new investment for sustainable growth. The findings revealed that many community members aspired to start businesses but faced significant barriers, highlighting the need for business support.

"St. Louis is a great city to be a startup," said Kittrell, now Beyond Housing's Senior Director of Transformative Services. "But when we were working with community members, we found that with many opportunities, there was a disconnect.

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—MICHELLE BYRD

Founder of Tender Love and Tresses

There was a chasm between the opportunity and where the founder was in this moment, and there didn’t seem to be a lot of bridging opportunities.”

Most programs geared toward new entrepreneurs in St. Louis are competitive and require business owners to show revenue. Many of the aspiring entrepreneurs Beyond Housing worked with did not qualify, and most programs were in locations inaccessible by public transportation, presenting an additional barrier. To address these challenges, Beyond Housing collaborated with local partners to launch the Biz Smart Start accelerator program, a free initiative designed to bridge the gaps and empower early-stage local entrepreneurs with the tools needed to grow their businesses.

Building the Foundation for Success

Biz Smart Start was piloted in May 2023 with a cohort of nine entrepreneurs in various industries ranging from home health care to catering services. Participants received a \$1,000 reward to invest in their businesses and attended a 12-week intensive program that included business coaching, strategic planning, and resource navigation. The program prioritizes minorities, women, disabled individuals, and other under-represented groups and provides childcare to participants.

The initiative quickly demonstrated its potential, with some significant outcomes achieved from the first cohort.

- Latricia SanNicolas joined the program with a strong passion for dogs and a vision to create a dog treat business. She successfully launched Maccabees Family Barkery and is now working towards establishing a commercial kitchen.

- Terence Payton transformed his small-scale cleaning operation into a thriving industrial cleaning business. He secured major contracts and is preparing to transition into full-time entrepreneurship.
- Michelle Byrd, founder of Tender Love and Tresses, a mobile natural hair care service for older adults, won a St. Louis Balsa Foundation grant, which provides entrepreneurs with additional resources and mentorship.

Byrd had operated Tender Love and Tresses alongside her full-time job for years, but the resources she gained from Biz Smart Start helped provide her with the vital support she needed to grow.

She explained how the program was instrumental in helping navigate the practical aspects of establishing a business. It provided guidance with steps like selecting bank partners and finding resources to help with business setup and branding.

“If you’re starting a business, you need the basics, like paying bills on time and managing your schedule,” said Byrd. “Creating ways to bridge the gap between those barriers is super helpful. It helps you make sure that you know what things you have to consider first if you’re serious about your business. You’ve already got your personal life to manage, and adding a business, which requires a whole different skill set, can be challenging. It could really make your business sink or swim.”

In addition to leveraging her knowledge to grow her business, Byrd has also returned to assist entrepreneurs in the next group of Biz Smart Start cohorts, sharing wisdom and lessons she has learned through this journey.





Adapting and Evolving

Beyond Housing gained valuable insights from the initial cohort to make several program improvements. For instance, they realized that issues such as housing instability would negatively impact a participant's success in the program, so they introduced a more thorough assessment process to identify and address foundational issues before accepting participants. They also restructured the mentoring and coaching relationships to better align with the needs of early-stage entrepreneurs and included more diverse coaches in the second round in response to cohort feedback.

Program leaders also recognize that the path toward entrepreneurship is not for everyone. The program allows participants to make well-informed decisions about whether becoming a business owner is something they wish to pursue. Beyond Housing offers career development assistance for participants who ultimately decide against pursuing entrepreneurship.

Creating Vibrant, Self-Sustaining Communities

The Biz Smart Start program's anticipated impact extends far beyond individual success. One of Beyond Housing's strategic goals, identified in a 2019 community assessment, is to create vibrant commercial corridors within the community, allowing residents to shop, work, dine, and play locally. By supporting entrepreneurs in creating thriving and economically viable businesses, the Biz Smart Start effort adds to individual household wealth and helps establish local businesses that provide essential goods and services, create jobs, and retain wealth within the community.

"Our long-term vision is for the business owners to have commercial spaces in the community and that those will also attract businesses from neighboring municipalities looking for spaces to open. That's where we will see the individual outcomes lead to community outcomes," said Kittrell.

Next Steps

The success of the Biz SmartStart program has swiftly elevated it to one of Beyond Housing's main priorities. The second cohort launched in the spring of 2024, and Beyond Housing has hired a business resource specialist to offer continued support to participants after the program ends. Future visions include expanding the program to offer a continuum of programming that includes a next-step accelerator for existing businesses and an incubator to provide commercial space, marketing support, money management, and operational guidance—allowing businesses to grow in a supportive environment before transitioning to commercial spaces in the community.

LEARN MORE

- [Learn about](#) Beyond Housing's initiatives.
- [Read more](#) about the SmartStart Accelerator Program.
- [View a summary](#) of their community impact.