



2024 - 2026 Strategic plan

Welcome to the 2024-2026 Knoxville Entrepreneur Center Strategic Plan.

Since 2013, Knoxville Entrepreneur Center has been a “center of gravity, without being the center of attention” in our entrepreneurial ecosystem, helping build a collaborative, supportive environment where entrepreneurs can thrive.

Nearly 300 respondents from Knoxville’s entrepreneurial community, including everyone from makers to CEO’s of rapidly growing technology companies shared their experiences with us through a detailed survey we released in winter 2022. This feedback, coupled with our own experience with 1000s of entrepreneurs, led us to our 3 year strategic plan, focused around three key pillars: **Capital, Capabilities, and Connections.**

Above all, we believe in changing lives through entrepreneurship. Supported by those three pillars, this plan serves as a guide for just that purpose, and a means to measure our progress as we work to become the most founder-friendly city in America.



Jim Biggs
 Executive Director,
 Knoxville Entrepreneur Center

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Our Purpose

Changing lives through entrepreneurship

Knoxville Entrepreneur Center (KEC) is a 501(c3) non-profit that exists to help people with ideas become founders with companies. We work to increase the economic and community success of founders from all walks of life, as well as early stage companies in Knoxville and East Tennessee by connecting them with the resources they need, from mentorship and education to capital.

Our Mission

To create a thriving entrepreneurial community that is accessible, diverse, and

Our community should be a place where entrepreneurs have access to the capital, customers and talent they need to be successful. We are a member of the [Innov865 Alliance](#), a group of companies and stakeholders dedicated to advocating for Knoxville's startups and entrepreneurs, ensuring our ecosystem is strong, vibrant and coordinated.

Our Vision

To become the most founder-friendly city in America

At KEC, we spend our time (like, all of our time) thinking about and working with entrepreneurs. Our goal is to get you started, help you grow, and to connect you with folks in the community who want to see that happen. We are committed to developing the ecosystem and providing a welcoming environment for all types of entrepreneurs and makers.



Our Values



Innovation

We are “founder-first” and believe that big challenges are best met when creative ideas are allowed to flourish, imagination is rewarded, and “it’s always been done this way” is never accepted as an answer.

Connectivity

We believe that an intentional, engaged network is essential to a successful entrepreneurial community, and that the people and companies that “came before” share a calling to lift up those that are “up next.”

Sustainability

We believe that a culture of entrepreneurship is crucial to building a healthy community, economy, and environment.

Diversity

We believe that a successful community culture thrives in the presence of diversity – of people, experiences, and opportunities.

Accessibility

We are committed to an inclusive, accessible entrepreneurial community, where those who are willing to take risk, create opportunities, and turn big ideas into action are supported and given access to the resources necessary to succeed.

KEC Supporters



10 Years of Community

A Closer Look



\$160 Million
Capital Raised



38 100Knoxville founders
with grants totaling
\$190,000

Over **50** INC 5000
Companies Celebrated



Over
1000
Veterans

\$100,000
in Pitch Competition Funding



Over
4000
Women



1000s
of mentor hours



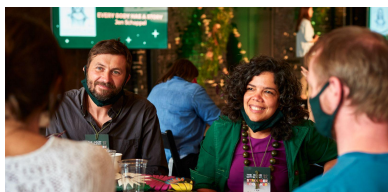
Over **1200**
New Entrepreneurs



Over
1000
Events



Over **200**
#MadeForKnoxville Profiles



over **600**
jobs created



26
Counties



6000
podcast downloads



Capital

Without access to capital, even the most innovative and promising ideas can wither on the vine, never reaching their full potential.

In particular, entrepreneurs from underrepresented communities, including women, people of color, and those from low-income backgrounds, often face significant barriers when it comes to securing funding. This can perpetuate cycles of economic inequality and limit opportunities for social and economic mobility. That's why it's so important that we work to expand access to capital for all entrepreneurs.

KEC will focus on three key areas:

Accessibility

Staffing, equipment upgrades, or building upgrades (among a host of other needs) remind us that different founders need different kinds of capital, and our goal is to make the full debt & equity capital continuum accessible to our diverse communities.

Availability

Working with our Innov865 partners to identify, open, and maintain connections between eligible businesses and available finance options will be crucial to our region's financial success.

Readiness

Boots on the Ground: From forming bank relationships to learning business basics, we want our founders to be ready when the time comes to raise capital.

“The community thrives when the economy thrives”

...Grady Vanderhoofven, Founder of 3 Roots Capital





Pillar 1

Capital

Accessibility

3 Year Goal

Increase number of entrepreneurs applying for funding from capital partners

How we'll get there

Secure funding for a permanent full-time “Capital Connector” role housed within KEC to help identify funding opportunities and to offer individual support to get founders “investment-ready”

Launch CAPTINUUM* capital framework to help companies identify, plan, and implement capital strategies

Form “Capital Council” of local finance leaders to work alongside capital connector to identify and coach entrepreneurs looking for funding

Availability

3 Year Goal

Work to ensure \$20M in new capital is available to service the entire capital continuum

How we'll get there

Increase number of companies receiving funding through InvestTN/FundTN programs

Work with local investors to create a seed fund, regional impact fund, and Series A fund to increase local capital available to high-growth startups

Increase micro-funding opportunities for underserved entrepreneurs, including the Maker City community and our 100Knoxville entrepreneurs, by \$500K

Readiness

3 Year Goal

Increase # of funded companies in Knoxville through debt & equity financing

How we'll get there

Partner with lenders and finance experts to host office hours and develop capital preparedness workshops throughout each year

Continue support for “Let Her Invest” program and other efforts to empower and educate women investors

Develop programming to support applications for non-dilutive funding such as SBIR/STTR grants and Crowdfunding platforms

**CAPTINUUM is a tool we are developing to help startups & growth companies identify the appropriate type of capital for their business by comparing their available leverage to a broad range of available capital options.*

Capabilities

Knowledge is power, and actively sharing knowledge will make our region more economically vibrant and our founders better equipped for leadership.

We don't call Knoxville "The Maker City" for nothing. We've got an engaged and collaborative founder community that prides itself on providing value by making incredible things, sharing big ideas, and advancing world changing technology. Our goal is to enable and inform our community with the most relevant entrepreneurial information, while connecting "startups" with experienced mentors.

KEC will focus on three key areas:

Knowledge

Entrepreneurs from our Maker community to our growth-stage technology startups face common hurdles to sustainable business growth, such as branding, marketing, and accounting foundations.

Talent

Understanding day-to-day talent needs, opportunities, and threats is essential for recruitment of talented people to our region, and even more important for retaining the incredible folks that are already here.

Mentorship

Nobody does this alone, and that's why KEC puts so much emphasis on mentorship. By focusing on our own "KEC-Certified" mentoring program, we'll effectively identify, activate, and pair subject matter experts with mentor needs.



"Art and entrepreneurship is for daredevils...and I'm here to tell you it can work. You'll cry, you may need a shoulder to lean on from time to time, but it is possible."

...Paris Woodhull, founder of Paris Woodhull Illustration

Pillar 2

Capabilities

Knowledge

3 Year Goal

**Improve the regions'
"Entrepreneurial IQ"**

How we'll get there

Continue and expand programming such as The Works; Inflection Point, and BrandCamp

Launch original "Entrepreneurship 101 & 201" five week cohort program series and new self-learning content

Complete development and deployment of "Essential Cog" self-directed learning modules

Continue monthly E-Commerce MasterMind group and launch similar groups to elevate different focus areas

Talent

3 Year Goal

Connect founders with people and skills needed to achieve business goals and retain local talent

How we'll get there

Work with UTK and chancellor's office to better define recruitment & retention needs of entrepreneur community

Develop internship programs, fellowships, or other pipelines to place students and recent graduates with startups, and give talented people a reason to stay in our region

Launch "Bundled" initiative to provide startups with access to free or heavily discounted professional services through a 'credit' system.

Mentorship

3 Year Goal

Create a mentor network that is trusted, resourceful, and diverse

How we'll get there

Re-launch KEC mentor program with at least 50 active mentors by 2025

Increase opportunities for mentors to engage in programming, events, and storytelling efforts

Deepen engagement between our programs and all six LaunchTN mentor networks

Connections



Our entrepreneurs do amazing things, and we want the community to know about it. In fact, we want the world to know about what makes our region so special.

We've got an ever-expanding, more diverse entrepreneurial workforce than ever. With a network of committed partners, growing businesses, and collaborative founders, we'll continue to bring people together to show the world what it means to become "the most founder-friendly city in America".

KEC will focus on three key areas:

Culture

A vibrant community is always changing, and we never take that for granted. KEC serves a broad range of founders, and we hard so that we can all learn from each other, gain experience, and make valuable connections.

Ecosystem

Bringing diverse entrepreneurs together in an intentional, meaningful way sets the stage for creative collisions, technological innovations, and impactful learning opportunities.

Storytelling

We are proud to continue connecting and amplifying the diverse entrepreneurial community in the Knoxville region — ranging from "solo-preneurs," makers, growth stage tech companies, investors, and established institutions.



"The support, friendship and resources we've received at KEC has been a critical factor in our success."

*...Bruce Ramshaw, CMIO, CareSyntax
(formerly founder of CQ Insights)*

BIG IDEAS WELCOME

A KNOXVILLE ENTREPRENEUR CENTER PODCAST

HOSTED BY
CHRIS MCADOO



Pillar 3

Connections



Culture

3 Year Goal

Increase loyalty, satisfaction, and enthusiasm (net promoter score) for Knoxville's entrepreneurial ecosystem

How we'll get there

Expand events and programming that celebrate entrepreneurship, such as the What's the Big Idea Pitch Competition and Maker City Summit

Host and support regular entrepreneur-focused meetups, where founders and mentors from across the ecosystem collaborate and network

Increase opportunities for KEC board community outreach and event participation

Ecosystem

3 Year Goal

Increase awareness and connection between entrepreneurs, support organizations, and private sector businesses

How we'll get there

Launch new Maker City directory highlighting maker success stories & economic impact of creative economy

Launch entrepreneurial ecosystem wayfinding program - the ultimate "Field Guide for Entrepreneurs"

Work with Innov865 Alliance to reignite LEAP (Local Executive Access Program), connecting founders with leaders in established local corporations

Create system to help entrepreneurs address needs for physical space

Storytelling

3 Year Goal

Improve regional & national perception of Knoxville as a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem

How we'll get there

Continue semi-weekly #MadeForKnoxville storytelling social campaign and website

Publish at least 12 new episodes/year of the "Big Ideas Welcome" podcast

Continue to expand Maker City media relationships with KNS, WATE, WBIR, and WVLTV

Expand collaboration with regional and national organizations to amplify reach of local campaigns

KEC Programming

A Closer Look

● Capital ● Connections ● Capabilities



● ● ●
KEC's flagship program, **The Works** is a 12-week startup accelerator for scalable technology companies focused on software, hardware, and lifestyle content developers.

● ●
Starting Your Business 101/ Growing Your Business 201 are two separate five-week business development programs that help aspiring entrepreneurs put ideas into action, and turn a passion into a sustainable and thriving small business.

●
Our annual INC 5000 celebration event brings together East Tennessee companies included on the "INC 5000" list and celebrate their achievements, while facilitating roundtable discussions and networking with the companies' leaders.

● ● ●
Having been designated the first "Etsy Maker City" in the United States, the Mayor's Maker Council is looking to cement our region's status as **The Maker City**, and THE place to create in Tennessee.

● ●
BrandCamp is designed to help Knoxville companies crystallize their brand and marketing and to prepare the next-generation for effective, growth-minded creative.

● ● ●
LEAP is an initiative focused on creating business development opportunities for startups in our region but connecting them with larger organizations interested in purchasing their products or services



● ●
Big Ideas Welcome is an original podcast introducing founders, makers, and change-makers – and the stories behind the big breaks, big challenges, and big ideas that connect us all.

● ● ●
Inflection Point is a 12 week business accelerator designed to help growth stage companies focus on key growth metrics such as strategy, culture, cash flow, marketing, and operations

●
"Made for Knoxville" is the most ambitious storytelling initiative Knoxville has ever seen - aiming to connect and empower the diverse entrepreneurial community in the Knoxville region – ranging from "solo-preneurs," makers, growth stage tech companies, investors, and established institutions.

● ● ●
100 Knoxville aims to grow minority business through the deliberate investment of assistance, capital, corporate engagement, and other resources - with a goal of growing Black-owned businesses in Knoxville by \$10,000,000 in 5 years.

● ● ●
What's the Big Idea? Is KEC's annual spring pitch competition, bringing together six founders and matching with teams of mentors over 48 hours - culminating in an incredible night of pitches to a packed house at Scruffy City Hall.

● ●
Small Town Entrepreneurship is a partnership between the KEC and USDA to bring the same great programs available to Knoxville entrepreneurs like CO.STARTERS, AgLaunch, & Etsy Entrepreneurship Program are now available to rural communities

● ●
Women in Entrepreneurship is a monthly forum for women entrepreneurs hosted at KEC that offers speakers, workshops, networking, and mentorship.

KEC Partnerships



CO.STARTERS + KAUL - for the past nine years, KEC has partnered with the Urban League to bring CO.STARTERS to Knoxville and the surrounding region. KAUL operates two classes annually under KEC's program license.



Women in Entrepreneurship + RGK - in addition to enjoying their amazing food, KEC has worked with Real Good Kitchen to bring workshops and programming to their food entrepreneurs.



The Maker City + City of Knoxville + ACA + Dogwood - KEC has worked with the City, the Arts and Cultural Alliance, and Dogwood Arts, to develop programming and events that celebrate and connect the creative community in our region and beyond.



BrandCamp + SPARK Cleantech Accelerator - KEC will be offering our BrandCamp workshop to the participants in the Spark Accelerator and ORNL's Innovation Crossroads program.



Innov865 Alliance - a collaboration between KEC and many of the support organizations in East Tennessee, the Alliance works to put on events such as Startup Day that showcase our region's diverse entrepreneurial talent.



Inflection Point Outdoors + VK + Legacy Parks - In partnership with Visit Knoxville and Legacy Parks, KEC developed a program intended to help businesses selling products or services related to the outdoors industry grow revenue and scale customer acquisition.



Made For Knoxville + Alliance - in addition to the many events done under the banner of the Innov865 Alliance, KEC has also been working with the Alliance to change the perception of Knoxville as a startup hub by elevating the profile of local entrepreneurs and celebrating their work.



100 Knoxville + Chamber + Local Sponsors - Initially launched in partnership with the Knoxville Chamber, and with funding from TVA, 100Knoxville has received ongoing support from a variety of sponsors that includes ORNL, Schaad Companies, Bank of America, Truist, First Bank, Verizon, and the Trust Company.



What's the Big Idea? + Chamber - one of our signature pitch events of the year, WTBI is a long-time collaborative event between KEC, the Knoxville Chamber, and Fairview Technology Center.



Small Town Entrepreneurship + Roane Alliance + Loudon Chamber + TSBDC - funded by a grant from USDA, KEC has worked with economic development organizations in rural areas to help support and promote opportunities for entrepreneurship in their communities.

KEC Staff

Jim Biggs, Executive Director

Delaney Boyd-Lawson, Director of Operations

Courtney Hendricks, Chief Operations Officer

Chris McAdoo, Director of Strategy & Engagement

Catherine Porth, MBA, Director of Insights & Development

Anne Templeton, Director of Maker Initiatives

Kelsi Walker, Communications Coordinator

Leslie Beale, Growth Stage Advisor

Patrick Hunt, Inflection.Point Facilitator

Holly Rainey, Social Media Manager

Kandis Troutman, MA, 100Knoxville Facilitator

Anna Wiggins, Business 101 Facilitator

KEC Board

2023-2024

Dr. Angelique Adams

CEO of Angelique Adams Media Solutions

Bob Bradley

CEO of Newsbreak

Melissa Centers

Attorney, Consultant, Board Advisor, Adjunct Professor

Richard Dapaah

KEC Executive-in-residence, Chief Business Officer of Sparkz, Inc.

Nikki Elliott

Partner & CFO at Elliott Advisory Group

Carter Hall

Policy & Strategic Projects Manager, City of Knoxville

Shannon Harper

President, Harper Auto Square

Lina Kornmeyer Evans

Market Executive at Bank of America

Jenna Johns

Board Chair, Formerly COO of RDI Technologies

Carol Seamons

Director of Engagement, UT Spark Innovation Center

Chris Trump

Shareholder and Attorney, Egerton McAfee

Get Involved

Funding

As a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, KEC is funded through sponsorships, partnerships, grants and programming fees. In addition to support from the City of Knoxville, and the State of Tennessee, KEC relies on the generous contributions of leading East Tennessee corporations, successful entrepreneurs and those who have a vested interest in the success of new businesses in our region. If you are interested in supporting our mission, please visit our [“Friends of KEC” page](#) on our website or reach out directly to hello@knoxec.net and we’ll set up a time to meet in-person.

Connecting

KEC helps entrepreneurs in Knoxville start and grow successful businesses. If you’re an entrepreneur looking for advice, guidance or assistance on how to move forward, we want to know you. Visit [our program page](#) to learn more. You can also [Sign up here](#) to get our mailing list and follow us on [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).

Mentorship

KEC Mentors come from all business backgrounds and experience, but they all share a love for helping to turn people with ideas into people with businesses. Our mentoring program give people who have been successful in business apply the chance to apply a lifetime of learning and skills to help ensure the next wave of great startups succeed here. Visit our [Mentor page](#) and fill out an application and to learn more.

Support

It may sound simple, but one of the most important and powerful acts you can take to support local businesses is to frequent their stores, buy their products, and share their work with your friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues.





Get in touch!

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[linkedin.com/company/knoxville-entrepreneur-center/](https://www.linkedin.com/company/knoxville-entrepreneur-center/)

[facebook.com/knoxstartshere](https://www.facebook.com/knoxstartshere)

[instagram.com/knox_ec/](https://www.instagram.com/knox_ec/)

twitter.com/Knox_ec

<https://vimeo.com/knoxec>



