

2023

YEAR IN REVIEW



**HEARTLAND
FORWARD**

AN INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMIC RENEWAL

Heartland Forward is a think and do tank dedicated to being a resource for states and local communities in the middle of the country.

We do this by studying broad economic trends and building data-driven and community-tested partnerships, programs and policies to address the needs of the heartland – all while helping to change the narrative about the middle of the country and kick-starting economic growth.

OUR PILLARS



INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Entrepreneurs are the lifeblood of a community's economy.

Our research and programs focus on developing opportunities to spur entrepreneurship and stimulate business creation right here in the heartland.



HUMAN CAPITAL AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

People along with their education and training are the most important asset of a state and region's economy.

Our work focuses on the education, training and funding of programs that promote job growth and stimulate local economies.



HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Accessibility, affordability and adoptability in health care must lead to simplifying and improving the health care system to achieve better individual health outcomes.

In this area of focus, we seek to advance the health care workforce, public policy, new technologies and quality of life.



REGIONAL COMPETITIVENESS

A successful and vibrant heartland is one that attracts and maintains a variety of businesses, entrepreneurs and human capital all while maintaining a healthy workforce and quality of life for the people who live and work in the region.

We are committed to ensuring the 20 states that make up the heartland remain the 3rd largest GDP in the world.

This past year marked a significant milestone for our think and do tank as we celebrated our fourth anniversary. We are now beginning to witness the realization of what sets us apart as an organization - the tangible impact of applied research on both our programmatic initiatives and policy endeavors.

As you navigate through the subsequent pages highlighting key moments from 2023, you'll observe that our reports are not only rich in data but also brimming with policy recommendations.

In many instances, these recommendations are strategically aligned with a policy road map, delineating which level of leadership (local, state, or federal) should consider the proposed policy changes. Furthermore, the Community Growth Program + Toolkit has transitioned into a new phase with the introduction of Stepping Stones.

Looking ahead to 2024, we are excited to launch a new initiative, Nursing Pathways, which originated directly from a report on rural healthcare access released in December 2022. Notably, this program secured a \$1.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.

Numerous instances like the above exemplify the team's accomplishments, underscoring the remarkable strides we've made. Leading this exceptional group who ardently believes in our mission and purpose of serving as a resource for states and communities, fills me with immense pride. Our collective commitment is dedicated to advancing economic success in the heartland.

- Ross DeVol

OUR RESEARCH

HEARTLAND FORWARD'S RESEARCH BOTH DRIVES AND RESPONDS TO OUR PROGRAMMATIC WORK

We release Research directly related to our four pillars:

INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP



Black Business Opportunity Strategy: The Journey of Black Business Owners in Memphis finds that although 46% of the adult population in Memphis is Black, only 7.3% of employer firms are Black-owned. The report makes policy and programmatic recommendations on how to support Black entrepreneurship.

HUMAN CAPITAL AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT



Child Care Policy Efficiency: What States Can do to Promote Affordable, Accessible High-Quality Child Care ranks states on their child care efficiency and offers policy solutions to improve. With more than three million children slated to lose child care by the end of 2023, the time is now for states, employers and philanthropy to take decisive action on improving child care outcomes.



WATCH HIGHLIGHTS OF THE BLACK BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY STRATEGY REPORT BEING PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE.

commercial appeal

News Sports Memphis Tigers Business Advertise Obituaries eNewspaper Legals

Memphis will continue to grow thanks to Black entrepreneurs, but they need support

Heartland Forward has offered a blueprint for supporting Black entrepreneurs in Memphis. Now, it's the time for leaders to act.

Andre Fowlkes and Jonas Crews Guest Columnists

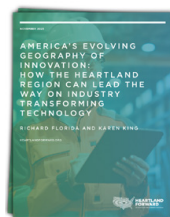
Published 7:03 a.m. CT Nov. 7, 2023 | Updated 7:03 a.m. CT Nov. 7, 2023

In the heart of the South, Memphis, a city rich in soul and musical heritage, boasts one of the largest Black populations — outnumbering cities like St. Louis, Boston and San Francisco. And while a recent report by Heartland Forward showcases the city's pride in its 55,000 Black-owned businesses, it also highlights a clear disconnect between its demographics and its entrepreneurial landscape.

REGIONAL COMPETITIVENESS



Place-Based Economic Development: Creating Growth in the Heartland evaluates how communities can take a place-based approach to economic development to advance their competitive advantage and sustain growth. Recent investments from the federal level to stimulate innovation, tech commercialization and domestic manufacturing necessitates states develop complementary, place-based strategies.



America's Evolving Geography of Innovation: How the Heartland Region Can Lead the Way on Industry Transforming Technology evaluates the shift in high-tech innovation and venture capital investment toward the middle of the country. Over the past decade, venture capital investment in the heartland has more than tripled. The summed average of investments between 2019 and 2021 in the 20 states making up the heartland reached \$55 billion. This investment surge underscores the region's growing significance in the national innovation framework in which some heartland cities and college towns are leading the way in becoming tech innovation hubs.

“*Place-based economic development uses an area's unique identity and sense of place as a competitive advantage for creating and sustaining growth, and involves policies tailored to regional characteristics, [...] Place-based economic development offers a better way to invest in and create jobs where Americans choose to live. It is certainly needed, as half of the nation's high-paying jobs are in just 30 (1%) U.S. counties.*”

— **Ross DeVol**
President and CEO of Heartland Forward

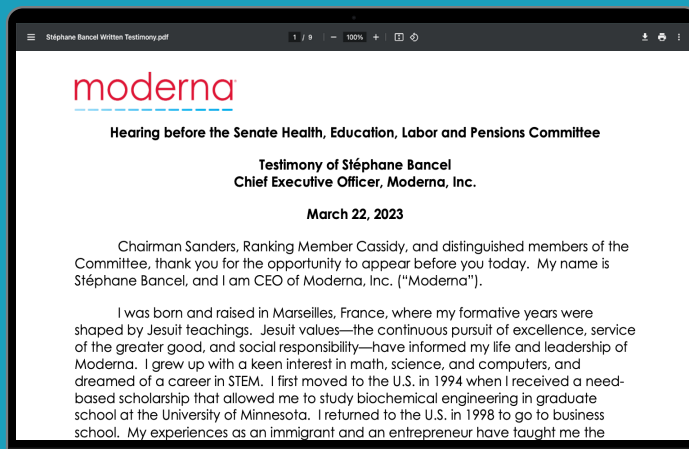
ACCESS TO ALL RESEARCH



OTHER HIGHLIGHTS



In March, 2023 Heartland Forward's [COVID-19 Vaccine Economic Savings report](#) was referenced in the testimony delivered to the U.S. Senate by Moderna's CEO.



COMMUNITY GROWTH PROGRAM + TOOLKIT

INNOVATION | ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The Builders + Backers Idea Accelerator powered by Heartland Forward inspires and equips people to experiment and solve problems in their local communities and build new ventures that have the opportunity to scale. The Idea Accelerator is the first phase of our work - funding entrepreneurs ([we call them Builders!](#)) to run fast experiments to

test the demand and early-stage feasibility for their idea - without the risk of quitting a job or school or having to relocate.

This approach opens a pathway for more people to participate in launching a business and advancing economically.

ABOUT THE IDEA ACCELERATOR

The Idea Accelerator is a rapid-pace, 90-day virtual program with a \$5,000 Pebble grant to enable anyone with an idea to get started. We offer training, funding and a dedicated team to enable participants to craft and run low-risk experiments that test their ideas and get ready to launch.



90-day
virtual program



\$5,000
Pebble grant

ABOUT STEPPING STONES

The Stepping Stones Program is a year-long hybrid program for curated small groups of alumni Builders (you must have completed the Idea Accelerator and apply for this competitive program). It is designed to help them launch their new ventures and get on a path to grow while increasing the likelihood of success.



2-3
full-time hires



\$1M in
annual revenue

The goal for each Builder is to get on a pathway to becoming an employer-based business (hiring two-three employees) that can drive \$1M in annual revenue

The Community Growth Program + Toolkit was our inaugural program we launched as a “think and do” tank. After the research presented in a study by Heartland Forward titled Young Firms and Regional Economic Growth finding most communities in the middle of the country are not participating fully in entrepreneurial growth — and the jobs, economic opportunity

and impactful ideas that come with it, this program was brought to the heartland allowing people to test their ideas without the risk of quitting their jobs, school or relocating. This program was piloted in June 2021, and today, we know it works. The numbers show us the results:

PROGRAM IMPACT



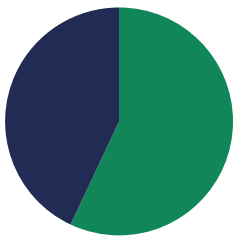
854 Builders
have been through the program



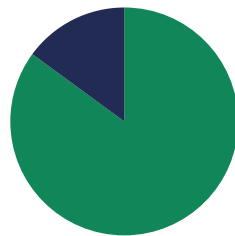
547 Ideas



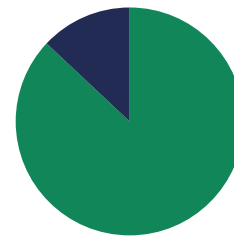
263 ventures launched



57%
of all cohort identify as women



74%
of all cohort identify as BIPOC



84%
retention in cohort



Average likelihood to recommend the program to a friend is

9.67 out of 10



13 Heartland states

have participated

Meet our Builders [HERE](#)



Five builders joined us on stage of the Heartland Summit for an Idea Pitch competition,

and then learned they were *all* selected to participate in the year-long program beginning in January 2024 - each receiving \$25,000 in funding to help scale their business. And we recently announced another seven are joining them.

CONNECTING THE HEARTLAND



REGIONAL COMPETITIVENESS | NUMBER ONE ECONOMIC ISSUE OF OUR TIME

We believe having affordable, high-speed internet access is the number one economic issue of our time. Connecting the Heartland (CTH), launched in 2021, to ensure families in the heartland have the high-speed, affordable internet service necessary for full participation in life in the digital age. This includes: health care, employment, education and so much more are dependent on a reliable, affordable, high-speed internet connection.

CTH is a multi-state, multi-pronged initiative to boost internet availability, affordability and adoption rates for participation in online services that are key to economic opportunity. Our work is focused to date in five states – Tennessee, Illinois, Arkansas, Ohio and Oklahoma. Our action-oriented efforts are focused on the ground as well as on policy solutions that together can serve to increase access to broadband and provide full participation in every aspect of digital communications. That means emphasizing affordability and adoption alongside expanding infrastructure.

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS
Democrat & Gazette

OPINION | ANGIE COOPER: Real life-changer

Internet access No. 1 economic issue

July 27, 2023 at 2:55 a.m.



PRESS RELEASE • SEPTEMBER 5, 2023



Heartland Forward and the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society Open Applications for Northeast Oklahoma Accelerate Program to Prepare Communities for Internet Infrastructure Investment

TULSA, Okla. (September 6, 2023)

Applications open today for six communities to participate in 16-week community engagement and planning program.

LANDLAKES INC. | BLOG



The inaugural graduating cohort of the American Connection Corps

By Abby Duinink
08.30.2023

This 'boots-on-the-ground' initiative of the American Connection Project trained and deployed 50 Fellows in communities across the country to tackle the challenge of connectivity



HEARTLAND HEALTH CAUCUS

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

At the Heartland Summit on Nov. 9, 2023, Heartland Forward joined state legislators and government officials to announce the launch of the Heartland Health Caucus, a nonpartisan legislative and policy organization comprised of **key health leaders across six heartland states**: Arkansas, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma and Tennessee. The Caucus serves as a forum to exchange new ideas in addressing pressing health issues and accelerating new and consistent policy approaches across states.

THE CAUCUS OBJECTIVES



Develop proposals to simplify the health care system by advancing state public policy and initiatives to decrease the complexities patients face in accessing health care within their communities.



Advance legislation to address heartland health needs to solve for pressing issues. Initial areas of focus include: telehealth, workforce and maternal health.



Champion health as an economic issue through supporting legislation, programs and thought leadership to highlight how a healthier population will lead to a robust workforce and thriving communities.

HUFFPOST

Bipartisan State Policymakers Unite To Improve Rural Health Care

The Heartland Health Caucus hopes to share practical ideas about to tackle issues that participating states have in common, like worker shortages in rural areas.

Nov 27, 2023, 08:34 AM EST



HEARTLAND FORWARD JOINED STATE LEGISLATORS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS TO ANNOUNCE THE LAUNCH OF THE HEARTLAND HEALTH CAUCUS. READ MORE IN COVERAGE BY THE [HUFFINGTON POST](#).

HEARTLAND SUMMIT



We are so energized by the connections and conversations that happened at this year's Heartland Summit, Heartland Forward's flagship event that brings together approximately 350 of the top thinkers and doers across sectors, geographies and generations right in downtown Bentonville, Arkansas. Thank you to all who participated and made this event possible.

ENJOY HIGHLIGHTS OF SUMMIT 2023

- 1 Significant opportunity exists in the heartland: from entrepreneurship to major innovations in tech, policy, arts and culture.
- 2 The middle of the country needs the coasts as much as the coasts need the middle of the country.
- 3 Child care and maternal health are not women's issues. They are critical pieces of the puzzle for families and communities to thrive.
- 4 Investors are in search of great entrepreneurs and Silicon Valley does not have a monopoly on scalable, impactful ideas.



COMMUNICATIONS



WE MADE 1429 HEADLINES THIS YEAR!

HERE ARE SOME OF
OUR FAVORITES:



FINANCIAL TIMES

'Our secret weapon': how a university bolstered Phoenix's rise as US chip capital

Myles McCormick in Phoenix
NOVEMBER 2, 2023

Arizona State's role in building a skilled labour force is part of a national trend as investors scramble for talent

MemphisFlyer

New Report Details Strategies for Development of Memphis' Black-Owned Businesses

In Shelby County alone, there are 10,613 Black business owners.

A new report released by Heartland Forward says that 12,571 Black residents in the city of Memphis earn their income through self-employment.

Arkansas Democrat Gazette

Angie Cooper

Always destined for a life of aiding mutual understanding, Angie Cooper has found her place bringing leaders together in the heartland

November 5, 2023 at 2:00 a.m.
by April Wallace

This week the Heartland Summit is bringing 350 policy makers, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, CEOs, founders, investors and others to Bentonville. Matthew McConaughey is this year's headlining speaker.



TBP

Milligan among 1st cohort of Obama Leaders program

August 21, 2023 2:18 pm

Katie Milligan, the entrepreneurship and workforce program director of "think and do tank" Heartland Forward in Bentonville, has been selected by former President Barack Obama as a member of the first class of the Obama Foundation's new Leaders USA program.

FOX23
NEWS

From foster care, to publishing a book that inspired a fashion show in downtown Tulsa

May 18, 2023 Updated Jul 25, 2023

TULSA, Okla. - Ammoni Myers arrived in Oklahoma in Nov. 2021 through the Tulsa Remote program. Now, she is preparing a collaborative fashion show event called "Threads of Change," through the Builders + Backers Idea Accelerator powered by Heartland Forward program.

THE OXFORD EAGLE

Builders + Backers and Heartland Forward award over \$1M to aspiring entrepreneurs

Today, Builders + Backers and Heartland Forward announced they have given over \$1 million in Pebble Fund grants to aspiring entrepreneurs throughout 2022 as part of the Idea Accelerator program.



Business Record
innovationIOWA

Guest Opinion: Anyone with a great idea is worth investing in

JULY 14, 2023 BY BUSINESS RECORD STAFF



AXIOS NW Arkansas

The Shift: Springdale entrepreneur's cups runneth over

Jun 28, 2023 - Business

Des Moines Register

New study adds to Des Moines metro's accolades as millennial mecca, ranking it No. 1

From Des Moines Register staff reports

GIVING GUIDE

Here are several ways you can fuel our mission:

- Join our Giving Circle with an annual \$25,000 gift each year for three years
- Support a Community Growth Program + Toolkit: Idea Accelerator and Stepping Stones
- Sponsor programs for pillars: human capital + workforce development or health and wellness
- Help by supporting a custom report or co-sponsoring an annual or biennial report like Most Dynamic Metropolitan and Most Dynamic Micropolitans
- Sponsor our flagship event, the Heartland Summit, for Spring 2025
- Sponsor our podcast — Meet Us in the Middle, or our newsletter — Heartland Happenings

Donate 

Give online or reach out to the Heartland Forward Development Team at giving@heartlandforward.org or by phone at **479-957-6301**.

WE THANK OUR GENEROUS DONORS

Thank you for the generous support from our donors in 2023! You keep the “heart” in the heartland, and for that, we are grateful.

- Arkansas Blue Cross and Blue Shield
- Arvest
- BDT & MSD Partners
- Bonita Bonita
- Clete and Tammy Brewer
- Jean Tracy Buckley
- Christian Brothers University
- City of Birmingham
- City of Montgomery
- Claudia San Pedro
- Cox
- Dillard’s
- Ford Foundation
- James and Barbara Freeman
- Ford Motor Company Fund
- Reed Greenwood
- Indiana University
- Iowa City Area Development Group
- J.P. Morgan Chase & Co.
- Jobs for the Future
- George Kaiser Family Foundation
- Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
- Heartland Whole Health Institute
- McKenna & Associates
- Mercy Health
- Michigan Central
- Morgan Stanley
- Nabholz
- Northern Trust
- Ozark Beer Company
- Pew Charitable Trusts
- Dennis Shaw
- Shawnee Tribes
- Simmons Foods
- State & Federal Communications Inc
- State of Arkansas
- State of Michigan-Michigan Economic Development Corporation
- Harriet and Warren Stephens
- Superior Automotive Group
- The Haslam III Foundation
- The Just Trust
- Tracy Family Foundation
- Trailblazers
- Tyson Foods
- University of Arkansas College of Engineering
- Visit Bentonville
- Walmart
- Walton Family Foundation
- Whetstone Wine Cellars
- Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation
- Women of Oz



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