



Mental health resources are increasingly digital and virtual. Many people would benefit from the power of digital over physical objects to help them.



COMMUNITY GROWTH PROGRAM TOOLKIT IMPACT REPORT

2021-2025



HEARTLAND FORWARD
A THINK-AND-DO TANK



BUILDERS + BACKERS®

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 3** OVERVIEW
- 4** IDEA ACCELERATOR
- 8** STEPPING STONES
- 11** IMPACT CALCULATOR
- 12** POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
- 13** PARTNERS AND COMMUNITIES
- 14** COMMUNITY GROWTH PROGRAM TOOLKIT (CGPT)
IN THE NEWS

Brinda Devine
Kornr Store **Detroit, MI**



OVERVIEW

The **Community Growth Program + Toolkit (CGPT)** was built to inspire people to see themselves as entrepreneurs and equip them with the skills to create new ventures and solve problems. Running from 2021 - 2025, the program included resources to help those starting out on their journey and encouraged peer-to-peer sharing of best practices. The CGPT included the following four initiatives:

▶ IDEA ACCELERATOR

Heartland Forward brought the Builders + Backers Idea Accelerator (a 90-day program that is a proven Onramp to Entrepreneurship™) to the heartland, empowering participants (called Builders), to put their business ideas into action. Builders received \$5,000 in Pebble Funds, which is grant money to run experiments to test the demand and early-stage feasibility for their idea.

From 2021 - 2025, the Builders + Backers Idea Accelerator powered by Heartland Forward supported over 1010 Builders in the heartland.

▶ STEPPING STONES

Heartland Forward also funded select, promising alumni of the Builders + Backers Idea Accelerator to join the year-long Builders + Backers Stepping Stones program. They received **\$25,000 in additional grant funding alongside professional mentorship to scale their businesses.**

The Stepping Stones program funded 27 Builders.

▶ IMPACT CALCULATOR

To help grow entrepreneurship and create value for communities, Heartland Forward created a first-of-its-kind interactive tool—the [Impact Calculator](#)—providing state comparison of entrepreneurial data.

▶ POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

As part of a grant with the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Heartland Forward worked with entrepreneurs to better understand the policy barriers they faced when starting and scaling their businesses. As part of these efforts, we convened small groups of entrepreneurs, midsize city mayors, gubernatorial offices and local elected officials working on small business and entrepreneurial issues, in the following key policy recommendations:

- **Reducing barriers to capital**
- **Accessing education**
- **Fostering a regulatory policy environment that encourages entrepreneurship**
- **Gaining the heartland entrepreneurial perspective**

IDEA ACCELERATOR IMPACT: EQUIPPING ENTREPRENEURS

From 2021 - 2025, the Builders + Backers Idea Accelerator powered by Heartland Forward supported:

1,010

Builders in the Heartland

- ▶ Programming in **15** States

10

Cohorts

- ▶ Entrepreneurs across **16+** industries

As a result, Idea Accelerator Builders:

Launched

307

Ventures

- ▶ Builders secured **\$8,281,335** in follow-on funding

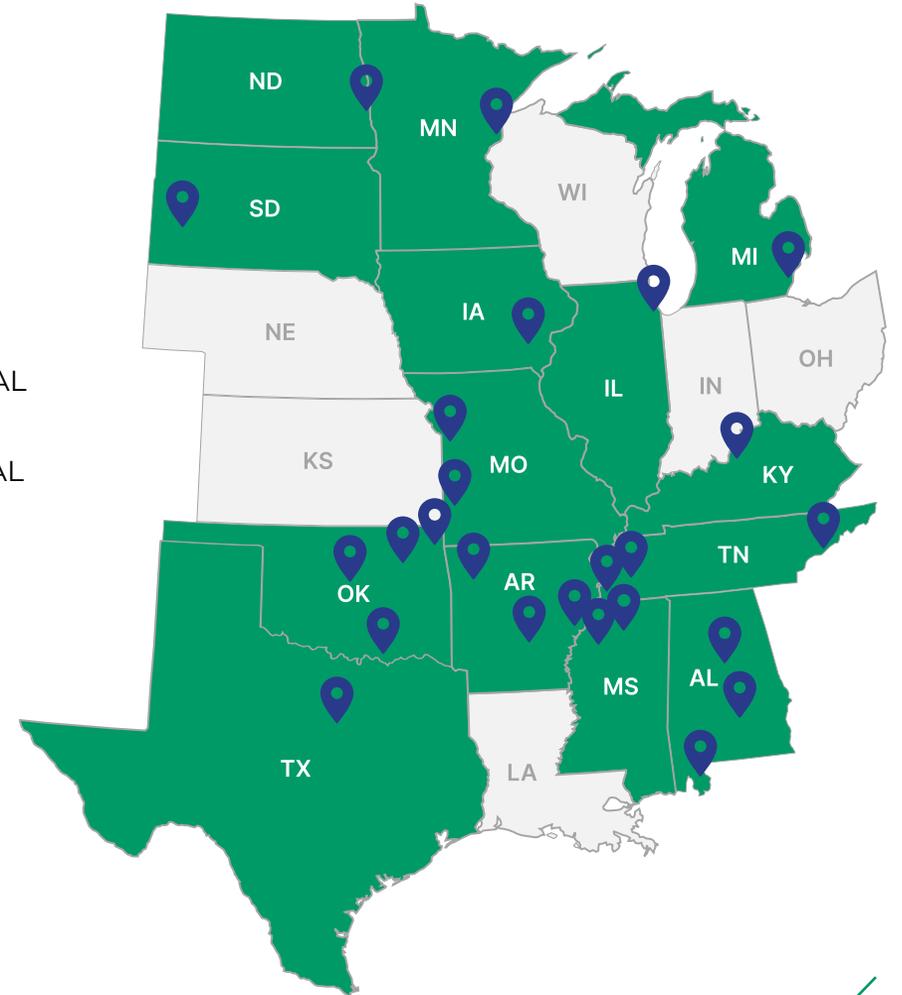
Robert Washington
Shelter Share **Oklahoma City, OK**



IDEA ACCELERATOR: COMMUNITIES



- Iowa City, IA
- Tulsa, OK
- Oklahoma City, OK
- Durant, OK
- Eastern Shawnee, OK
- Joplin, MO
- Kansas City, MO
- Pine Bluff, AR
- Northwest Arkansas
- Helena-West Helena, AR
- Clarksdale, MS
- Oxford, MS
- Duluth, MN
- Fort Worth, TX
- Fargo, ND
- Rapid City, SD
- Greenville, TN
- Jackson, TN
- Memphis, TN
- Detroit, MI
- Montgomery, AL
- Mobile, AL
- Birmingham, AL
- Chicago, IL
- Louisville, KY



IDEA ACCELERATOR:

TESTIMONIALS



Tony Mudd
Sensori Safety
Louisville, KY

“Participating in the Builders + Backers Idea Accelerator powered by Heartland Forward has been an incredible experience. It has given me the opportunity to fine-tune my business ideas and gain valuable insights from mentors and fellow entrepreneurs. This program has empowered me to take SafeEngage to the next level, bringing me closer to my mission of improving workplace safety on a larger scale.”



Sheila Garrett
Tea-riffic Tours
Chicago, IL

“The opportunity for me to participate in the Builders + Backers Idea Accelerator powered by Heartland Forward has meant so much to me. It’s given me the dare to dream bigger than I could ever imagine and the push I needed; all while holding my hand to put my thoughts into action.”

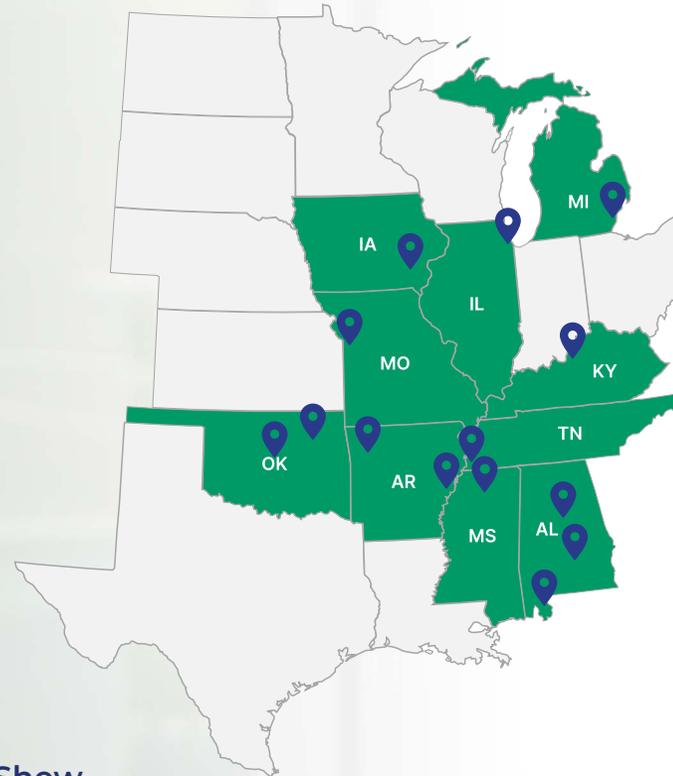


Jennifer Vokolek
Bradford Bait Delivery
Kansas City, MO

“Being a part of the Builders and Backers 2024 cohort is one of the most fulfilling things I have ever done. I could not and would not be here doing this if it weren’t for Builders + Backers Idea Accelerator powered by Heartland Forward. The most important and encouraging part of this entire cohort was the mentoring. The wisdom and cheerleading I received from my mentors and program leaders were invaluable. I cannot say enough great things about this program. It will change your life.”

IDEA ACCELERATOR COVENINGS

To facilitate the sharing of best practices and ideas and to help grow their businesses, Builders gathered together across the heartland to meet with partners, funders and community leaders in the following locations:



- Tulsa, OK
- Oklahoma City, OK
- Oxford, MS
- Detroit, MI
- Northwest Arkansas
- Helena-West Helena, AR
- Montgomery, AL
- Birmingham, AL
- Louisville, KY
- Chicago, IL
- Mobile, AL
- Kansas City, MO
- Memphis, TN
- Iowa City, IA



Natalie Shew
EmployWell Fayetteville, AR

STEPPING STONES IMPACT: SCALING OPPORTUNITIES

In four years, the Stepping Stones program supported:

27 Builder Teams

27 New Businesses incorporated in the heartland

Deployment of **\$400,000** in Stepping Stone Grants

- ▶ Builder received **\$10,000** in 2023
- ▶ Builder received **\$25,000** in 2024

Heartland Forward raised **\$650,000** to support **27 Builders**

Stepping Stones Builders have:

- ▶ Generated **\$700,274** in revenue
- ▶ Hired **41** new employees
- ▶ Launched **8** new products



STEPPING STONES:

TESTIMONIALS



Misti Staley

FreeArm

Helena-West Helena, AR

“Participating in the Stepping Stones program through Builders + Backers was incredibly beneficial for scaling FreeArm. The ongoing support, mentorship and expertise from the Builders + Backers team helped us refine our strategy and strengthen our business model. Being part of a community of startups and small businesses provided valuable peer learning and encouragement throughout our growth journey. Attending the Heartland Forward Summit and presenting the FreeArm pitch was an amazing opportunity that led to great press coverage, meaningful connections and an expanded network that continues to open doors for our company.”



Shannon Reardan

Heiss Mugs LLC

Birmingham, AL

“The Stepping Stones program was instrumental in getting Heiss Mug LLC off the ground. It provided not only essential guidance and funding but also a supportive network of inspiring and ambitious individuals who continue to motivate me. Heiss Mug, a product that started out as nothing more than an idea and a few engineering sketches, is on track to have its finalized prototype ready for mass production by the end of 2025—a dream that would have never been possible without the support of my Stepping Stones mentors and the incredible cohort of entrepreneurs I’m connected to through this program.”

BUILDERS AT THE HEARTLAND SUMMIT

2023

5 Builders pitched their business ideas for the opportunity to be accepted into the Builders + Backers 2024 Stepping Stones cohort and receive \$25,000 in funding.

▶ The 2024 Stepping Stones program kicked off with a **2-day workshop** in Bentonville, Arkansas.

▶ The 12 companies focused on **experimentation, product launch, sales and marketing** and **utilizing AI**.

PARTICIPATING BUILDERS:

- ▶ **Amber Hayes**
SecondKeys **Memphis, TN**
- ▶ **Dimitri Clark**
Abily **Fayetteville, AR**
- ▶ **Elysia Springer**
Gnargo **Bentonville, AR**
- ▶ **Misti Staley**
Free Arm **Helena-West Helena, AR**
- ▶ **Andy Sajnani**
NovAI **Tulsa, OK**



IMPACT CALCULATOR

NEARLY 17,000 VISITORS ENGAGED THE TOOL

A first-of-its-kind interactive platform for entrepreneurs to help expand their access to capital, the Impact Calculator allowed users to identify and compare resources and entrepreneurial data across different states.

Measure	Actual Values for Arkansas	Try Hypothetical Values
Percent of Households with a Computer in the Home	88.6%	<input type="text" value="91.1%"/> <i>Try 90.9%</i> <i>Input Range: 83.9%-98.6%</i>
Percent of the Adult Population with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher	23.3%	<input type="text" value="29.6%"/> <i>Try 28.6%</i> <i>Input Range: 16%-49.8%</i>
Young Firm Deals per Million People	25.55 Deals	<input type="text" value="35.01 Deals"/> <i>Try 98.34 Deals</i> <i>Input Range: 0 Deals-403.65 Deals</i>
Young Firm Capital Investment per Million People	\$11,805,596	<input type="text" value="\$35,567,294"/> <i>Try \$313,500,363</i> <i>Input Range: \$0-\$1,912,960,260</i>
Business R&D Spending per Million People	\$156,279,811	<input type="text" value="\$2,242,115,904"/> <i>Try \$0</i> <i>Input Range: \$0-\$5,000,015,590</i>
Government Grants to Businesses per Million People	2.65 Grants	<input type="text" value="5.30 Grants"/> <i>Try 0.00 Grants</i> <i>Input Range: 0 Grants-30.37 Grants</i>

Select a State
How to Order States?

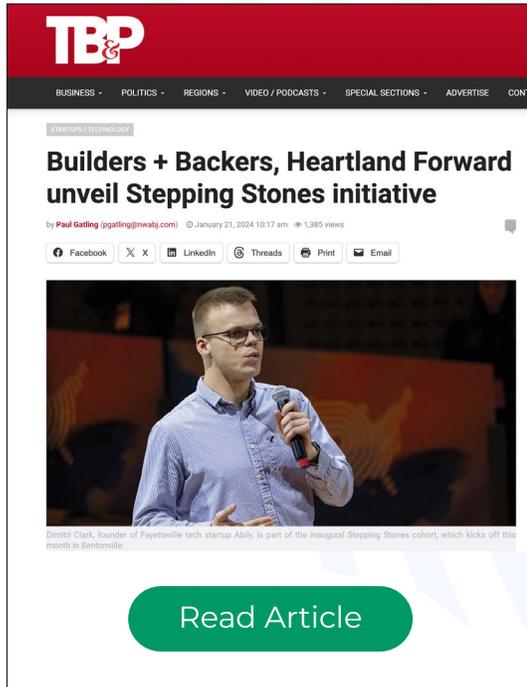
State	Actual Rank	Hypothetical Rank
California	1	1
New York	2	2
Utah	3	3
New Jersey	4	4
Colorado	5	5
Massachusetts	6	6
Nevada	7	7
Florida	8	8
Washington	9	9
Virginia	10	10
Alaska	11	11
Hawaii	12	12
Oregon	13	13
Texas	14	14
Maryland	15	15
Idaho	16	16
Connecticut	17	17

OUR PARTNERS

- Arvest Bank-Joplin
- City of Birmingham
- City of Mobile
- City of Montgomery
- Duluth Chamber of Commerce
- Durant Industrial Authority
- Eastern Shawnee Tribe
- Elevate Rapid City
- Epicenter
- Ford Motor Fund
- Ford Philanthropy
- George Kaiser Family Foundation
- Go Forward Pine Bluff
- Grand Farm
- Greater Iowa City
- Inasmuch Foundation
- Innovation Portal
- John Peter Smith Hospital
- Joplin Area Chamber of Commerce
- Lafayette County
- Michigan Central/New Lab
- MOKAN Partnership
- Niswonger Foundation
- Northland Foundation
- Office of Mayor Emily Larson
- Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce
- Oxford-Lafayette Chamber Foundation
- City of Oxford
- The Co.
- University of Mississippi
- University of North Texas, Health Science Center at Fort Worth
- Walmart
- Walton Family Foundation



CGPT IN THE NEWS



TBP
BUSINESS - POLITICS - REGIONS - VIDEO / PODCASTS - SPECIAL SECTIONS - ADVERTISE - CONTACT

STARTUPS / TECHNOLOGY

Builders + Backers, Heartland Forward unveil Stepping Stones initiative

by Paul Gatling (pgatling@nwab.com) | January 21, 2024 10:17 am | 1,385 views

Facebook X LinkedIn Threads Print Email



Samuel Clark, founder of Fayetteville tech startup Ability, is part of the inaugural Stepping Stones cohort, which kicks off this month in Bentonville.

[Read Article](#)



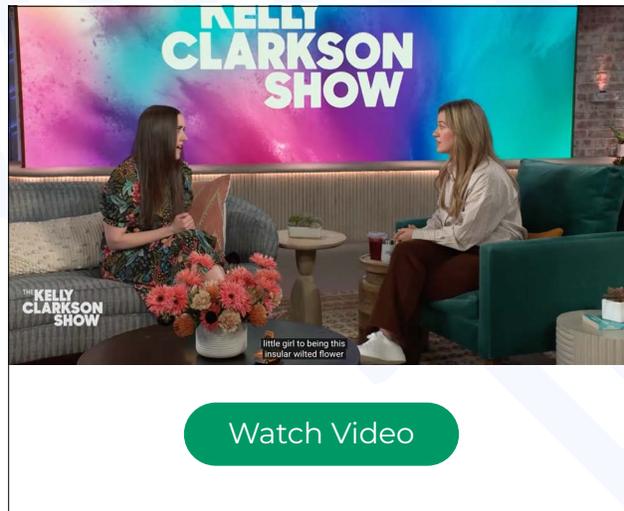
SPOTLIGHT CHICAGO

TEA-RRIFIC TOURS | LOOKING FOR A SECOND LINE BAN

New Orleans Style Afternoon Tea Party

1:18 70°

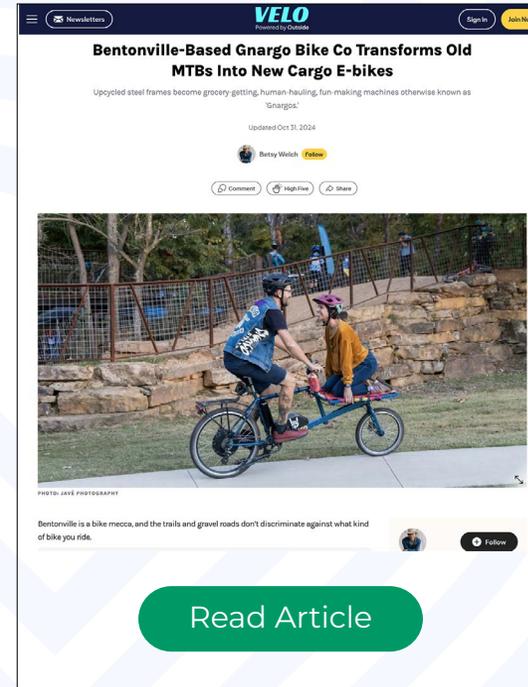
[Watch Video](#)



KELLY CLARKSON SHOW

little girl to being this regular wild flower

[Watch Video](#)



VELO
Bentonville, Arkansas

Bentonville-Based Gnargo Bike Co Transforms Old MTBs Into New Cargo E-bikes

Upcycled steel frames become grocery-getting, human-hauling, fun-making machines otherwise known as 'Gnargos.'

Updated Oct 31, 2024

Betsy Welch Follow

Comment High-five Share



PHOTO: JANE PHOTOGRAPHY

Bentonville is a bike mecca, and the trails and gravel roads don't discriminate against what kind of bike you ride.

[Read Article](#)



HEARTLAND FORWARD
AN INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMIC RENEWAL

[Watch Video](#)



Heartland Forward is a non-profit, policy think-and-do tank that turns ideas into action for states and local communities. Our mission is to accelerate economic growth, change the narrative about the middle of the country and generate \$500 million of economic impact to the heartland by 2030. We do this through applied research, community-driven programs, policy and convenings—focusing on regional competitiveness, talent pipeline and health and wellness.

Website



Builders + Backers helps entrepreneurial dreamers become builders who create and grow thriving companies. We make entrepreneurship possible for everyone by combining AI-powered expertise and human wisdom with proven methods for bringing ideas to life. Our hands-on approach guides company builders every step of the way—from idea validation to launch and beyond. We've reimaged how great companies get built. Because entrepreneurship isn't a privilege, it's a power that belongs to everyone, everywhere. For more information, visit www.buildersandbackers.com.

Website



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