



E3 Douglas County

Final Report & Recommendations

November 2024

1. Program Overview

The E3 Nation Tour was designed as a 3-day comprehensive, interactive experience, featuring workshops, Town Halls, and guided discussions on equity-centered entrepreneurial ecosystems. The program provided in-depth explorations of systemic barriers for underrepresented groups, combined with strategic sessions for actionable community collaboration.

This initiative aimed to provide Douglas County, Kansas, with the tools and frameworks necessary to center the voices and needs of entrepreneurs of color in the region, particularly those from Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and immigrant communities. It unfolded at a critical time, addressing the widening racial wealth gap and the underrepresentation of BIPOC entrepreneurs in local economies.

By engaging stakeholders through Town Halls, workshops, and strategic planning sessions, the E3 Nation Tour established a foundation for long-term change, focusing on how local resources and assets could be aligned to support equitable entrepreneurship.

2. What We Did Together

Participants used the **Strategic Doing** framework, a methodology designed to harness local assets and generate collaborative solutions. Through this process, attendees were tasked with identifying specific community assets and resources, and exploring how these could be effectively linked and leveraged to address the identified challenges.

The E3 Douglas County experience kicked off with a 3-day in-person event in February 2023, where members of the Douglas County entrepreneurial ecosystem gathered to discuss systemic inequities and strategize on how best to support entrepreneurs of color. This event featured:

- **Discovery Tours** of local businesses and key community assets, helping participants see the entrepreneurial ecosystem through an equity lens.



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- **Ecosystem Building 101:** A session where Forward Cities' experts provided insights on building a thriving, inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem.
 - **Ecosystem Town Hall:** Participants heard directly from Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous entrepreneurs about their experiences, challenges, and opportunities. These stories became the backbone for understanding what needed to be done to foster an inclusive ecosystem.
 - **Catalyzer Breakfast:** This engaged local policymakers, government leaders, and philanthropic institutions to discuss the importance of policies and funding for equitable entrepreneurship.
 - **E3 Scorecard:** An interactive, real-time assessment session, sparking discussions on emerging priorities for collective change.
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3. Reach & Impact

The 3-day event vividly illuminated key barriers such as limited access to capital, mentorship gaps, and systemic inequities. One participant noted, *"We often feel invisible within the ecosystem. Our businesses are not marketed or supported in the same way as others."* This reflection was echoed by many, reinforcing the need for an intentional focus on visibility and support.

Conversations, insights, and reflections from the week served to inform a forward-looking strategy. Leaders and stakeholders envisioned a future where BIPOC entrepreneurs are leveling up, creating agency, and shifting from employee mindsets to entrepreneurial mindsets.

Over the course of three days, the initiative engaged a broad cross-section of stakeholders, including 31 entrepreneurs, 28 support organization leaders/staff, 25 government leaders/funders, and 29 other entrepreneurial champions, for a total of 113 registrants.

5. What We Created

The **Entrepreneur Listening Project** is the most significant outcome of the E3 Nation Tour. It was designed to document and elevate the stories of BIPOC entrepreneurs in Douglas County, with the goal of influencing local decision-making, policy development, and resource allocation.

- **Narrative Collection:** Working with grassroots leaders, the project gathered detailed stories from entrepreneurs, focusing on their lived experiences, challenges, and the systemic barriers they face in starting and growing their businesses. This was done through 1-on-1 storytelling sessions and small group conversations.

- **Community Engagement:** The stories collected were shared during community events and strategic meetings, ensuring that local decision-makers, policymakers, funders, and support organizations heard directly from entrepreneurs. This helped to foster a culture of community-led solutions.

The project also produced a **compelling video**, which serves as both a storytelling tool and a catalyst for action. This video not only captures the lived experiences of BIPOC entrepreneurs but is intended to be a focal point for community conversations and a resource for educating stakeholders on the urgent need for systemic change.

6. What We Learned

The **Entrepreneur Listening Project** revealed several critical insights into the challenges and opportunities facing BIPOC entrepreneurs in Douglas County:

1. **Stories hold the potential to span divides:** Stories can transcend language barriers, connecting people through shared emotions and experiences.
 2. **Embracing the power of representation:** It's crucial to center BIPOC voices in all spaces, ensuring full representation and empowerment.
 3. **People first, then business:** Prioritizing people over business fosters trust and stronger relationships, leading to long-term success.
 4. **Value businesses at all stages:** Entrepreneurs of color should be celebrated for their contributions, regardless of where they are in their business journey.
 5. **Intersectionality is key:** Entrepreneurial inequity intersects with fields like mental health, financial trauma, and historical trauma. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach.
 6. **An equity lens is required:** A new mental model prioritizing inclusivity and equity must be adopted to shift power dynamics.
 7. **Access to capital is vital:** Securing funding remains one of the most significant challenges for BIPOC entrepreneurs, compounded by systemic biases.
 8. **Cultural and language barriers:** Hispanic entrepreneurs in particular face challenges due to language barriers, highlighting the need for multilingual resources.
 9. **Representation and visibility matter:** BIPOC entrepreneurs often feel invisible in the local ecosystem. Greater efforts are needed to celebrate and promote their contributions.
 10. **MOST IMPORTANTLY... Systems change and sustainability is a must:** There is no quick fix. Structural barriers such as discriminatory lending practices and lack of mentorship must be addressed at a systemic level for real progress. This approach takes time, patience, and sustained investment.
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7. Recommended Next Steps

Host a Second Town Hall | Use the Entrepreneur Listening Project video as the centerpiece of a community Town Hall, inviting entrepreneurial leaders, support organizations, and funders to discuss the findings. This event can serve as a springboard for identifying actionable steps to address the challenges faced by BIPOC entrepreneurs and to explore sustained funding mechanisms for ongoing work. Here is a high-level recommendation for an agenda for a 2-hr event.

- Welcome
- Introduction of Funders & Working Group Members
- Housekeeping & Session Goals
- Attendee Introductions at Tables
- Revisiting E3 Nation Tour w/ Photos - invite audience to share reflections
- Brief Description of Strategic Doing Group Process
- Articulation of Learnings
- Show Video
- Introduction of Featured Entrepreneurs - from either the original E3 visit or the video
- Facilitate discussion groups and tables and have one person from each table share out afterward. At each table, ensure there is at least one featured entrepreneur. Featured entrepreneurs should be prepped in advance to share their story and perspectives in the table discussions.
 - a. At each table, have the featured entrepreneur briefly share their story (2 min): their name, their business, what success looks like to them, and the biggest challenge they face.
 - b. What specific barriers or challenges faced by BIPOC entrepreneurs stood out to you in the video - or in what the featured entrepreneur at the table shared. How do these challenges reflect broader systemic issues within our local entrepreneurial ecosystem?
 - c. What assets, strengths, funding or other resources exist within our community that could be better leveraged to support BIPOC entrepreneurs? How can we begin to mobilize these assets for greater impact?
 - d. The video highlighted a lack of trust between institutional organizations and grassroots entrepreneurs and leaders. What are the key factors contributing to this mistrust, and how can we bridge the gap between institutional organizations and grassroots efforts to build stronger, more effective collaborations?

Funder Follow-Ups | Schedule follow-up meetings with funders present at the Town Hall to explore ways they can support the work going forward in a sustainable manner.



Share the Video Widely | Distribute the video online to the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem and community. This can spark conversations and drive narrative change regarding equity and inclusion.

Pursue Other Funding Opportunities | Seek and apply for follow-on funding opportunities that will allow the collective to continue aligned efforts.

Continue Meeting & Collaborating | We recommend that the Entrepreneur Listening Project group continue to meet on a monthly basis. These meetings should focus on reflecting on the framing question: *"How might we foster an ecosystem culture that equitably centers and values entrepreneurial leaders of color?"* By exploring how the group can continue to link and leverage community assets, the meetings will ensure ongoing progress toward developing solutions for the identified barriers. Keep an eye out for other committed champions and invite them to join as it makes sense.

Explore Cross-Community Learning | We encourage one or more of the group to explore and lean into opportunities for cross-community learning by staying connected to national communities of entrepreneurial ecosystem builders. We recommend the [Ecosystem Building Leadership Network](#) and [Startup Champions Network](#).