



Perspectives on the Community Business Connector Pilot:

*Insights from the King County Business
Community*

executive summary

This evaluation was conducted to assess the role and approach of the Community Business Connector (CBC) pilot program in fostering regional collaboration within the small business support ecosystem. As CBC continues to evolve, understanding how it strengthens our function as resource navigators and liaisons is critical to ensuring meaningful support for the small businesses we serve.

The evaluation draws on feedback from small business owners, service providers, and Community Business Connectors to provide a comprehensive picture of the program's current strengths and areas for improvement. Participants shared insights on how CBC has facilitated connections, enhanced access to resources, and addressed local business needs – while also highlighting challenges related to communication, coordination, and program awareness.

Key findings emphasize both the value of CBC in creating a more cohesive support network and the opportunities for refining its structure and outreach. Based on these findings, the report offers specific recommendations to guide future service adjustments and ensure the program continues to meet the evolving needs of small businesses across the region.

This report is intended to inform decision-making, encourage reflection, and support ongoing collaboration among CBC partners.

Small Business Interviews

Methods

DIRS recruited current business participants from October 2024 through January 2025 for the interviews.



Five small business owners participated in interviews, representing diverse businesses, including a hair salon owner, a food truck owner, an indoor playground/family space owner, a cleaning service owner, and a family-owned wholesale restaurant business. These small business owners learned of the program through various channels, such as direct outreach from the Chamber, self-referral, business network referrals, and grant information sessions. The interviews focused on small business owners' backgrounds, service utilization, the potential impact, and recommendations for improving the CBC program. Small business owners were provided with a \$50 incentive for their participation.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed for accuracy. Thematic analysis used Braun and Clarke's framework to analyze the interview data. This analysis identified two overarching themes, each comprising five related subthemes. It is important to note that while the interviews with small businesses provide valuable insights into the CBC program, the small sample size (N=5) should not be interpreted as representative of all CBC program participants' experiences. In other words, the findings of this report represent the five small business owners who participated in interviews, providing additional context to their experience.

findings



Key Program Benefits

The first theme focuses on how the CBC program positively impacted small business owners in launching or sustaining their businesses through coordinated support services. The CBC program's benefits are centered around five subthemes: (1) helping owners navigate available resources and build connections, (2) providing culturally responsive support, (3) offering targeted business development assistance, (4) receiving mentorship and peer learning, and (5) assisting with administrative and financial guidance.



“I end up meeting more people. Then, they had some events where SBA and other organizations were there. From there, I was connected with more organizations. Then, I was thinking, Wow. It seems like there’s many resources out there that I’m unaware of.”



Resource Navigation and Connections

Small business owners found the CBC program valuable in connecting them with business resources, including funding opportunities, mentorship, and networking. These referrals helped them navigate challenges and expand their business reach. According to participants, the program’s Connectors served as knowledgeable intermediaries who understood small business owners’ specific needs and matched them with appropriate resources and support services. Small business owners particularly valued how Connectors provided step-by-step guidance through available resources rather than simply offering a list of contacts. As illustrated by multiple small business owners, this structured approach to resource navigation helped them access opportunities they wouldn’t have known about otherwise, from grant programs to industry-specific mentors. The personalized referral process meant business owners could focus on implementing recommendations rather than spending time searching for appropriate resources. Two small business owners’ experiences illustrate how they navigated available resources and built connections through their trusted CBC Connector:

“The way that [the CBC Connector] helped me get my business started is through their resources. They gave me information to utilize right at that moment. I was in the city of Renton when I moved here, so [the Connector] referred me to the mayor of Renton. I talked to her. [The Connector] gave me advertisements for people who do flyers and stuff like that. He just gave me resources out of their Rolodex for me to talk to. From there, I formed business interests with other people. I started networking and getting into the swing of things.”





Cultural and Linguistic Support

The availability of culturally and linguistically tailored services was a critical factor in accessing the CBC program, particularly for immigrant small business owners.

Access to staff who understood their native language and cultural practices significantly impacted small business owners' ability to use CBC services.

For example, one small business owner described how having a the same-speaking staff member enabled them to understand and access program resources. Conversely, other immigrant business owners struggled

when language support wasn't available, compelling them to rely on family members to translate or miss opportunities due to communication barriers. This variation in language access created diverse program experiences, where some small business owners could fully engage with services while others remained on the periphery of program benefits. The experience of the one small business owner highlights this dynamic. The son of small business owners could navigate program resources in English, but their parents, who operated the daily business, faced significant barriers due to their limited English proficiency. The following two quotes highlight the importance of the CBC program tailoring cultural and linguistic support:



“I’m so lucky that the connector assistant is Thai. It’s easier... my English is not quite good, but it's okay. My husband can speak English. When I go with him, it’s okay, but if I go alone, maybe there are some points or information I do not understand.”

“They open the store at 6:00 a.m. They close at 8:00 p.m. They’re tired. They’re exhausted. Also, they don’t really speak English.”



“The farmers market was part of my membership... it helped me be out there and talk to my community and actually do a target research, market research in person.”

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Business Development Support

The CBC program provided crucial business development assistance extending beyond basic support services. This business development support included strategic planning, marketing guidance, and operational assistance tailored to each business’s stage of development. Connectors helped new business owners navigate complex permitting processes and licensing requirements. More established businesses received support with expansion strategies and technology adoption, such as implementing POS systems. The structured nature of this assistance was particularly valuable - rather than providing generic business advice, Connectors worked with small business owners to develop staged implementation plans that accounted for their specific business constraints and opportunities. Two small business owners’ experiences illustrate these impacts:

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“Because I’m learning through all these organizations, all these people that I’m talking with, now I’m equipped with the knowledge of how to do it. That’s powerful. Because of that, I’m able to show my parents [who operate the daily business].”



Mentorship & Peer Learning

Mentorship and peer learning also contributed positively to business development in the CBC program. Small business owners emphasized how the CBC program facilitated meaningful connections with experienced entrepreneurs who provided tactical business guidance and strategic insights.

These mentorship relationships went beyond simple advice-giving; they created sustained learning opportunities where established business owners shared their experiences navigating similar challenges.

The CBC Connectors played a key role in these relationships by carefully matching mentors with

mentees based on business type, stage of business development, and the business owner’s specific needs. For example, business owners talked about the value of these relationships in several ways. Conversely, immigrant business owners noted that mentors helped bridge cultural gaps in business practices. On the other hand, first-time entrepreneurs found guidance in navigating regulatory requirements and market dynamics. The more established businesses reported gaining insights into growth strategies and operational improvements. The structured approach to building these relationships - having small business owners work through connections systematically rather than all at once - allowed for deeper engagement and learning. As illustrated by one small business owner:

“The most beneficial thing that I feel is [that the CBC Connector] understood our situation by taking the time to listen. Then, he gave me a list of people and resources that he told me to go through step by step. One by one. He said to go through this person first, then this, and then this. I did that. Then, through that, I met very incredible people.”



Administrative and Financial Guidance

Administrative and financial guidance was an important support for CBC program participants, particularly those in the initial stages of their business. This assistance addressed a gap for small business owners with industry expertise but lacked business administration experience.

The CBC program support helped owners with basic bookkeeping, complex financial planning, and navigating Seattle’s/King County’s regulatory labyrinth. Small business owners primarily expressed value in tailored guidance that met their business’s specific needs and stage of development.

The impact of administrative and financial support was especially significant for some immigrant business owners and first-time entrepreneurs who found themselves confronting unfamiliar regulatory requirements and financial systems. Through CBC Connectors, small business owners accessed professional services like accounting and legal advice that might otherwise have been cost-prohibitive. The program’s ability to provide initial free consultations allowed owners to address immediate administrative needs while developing longer-term fiscal management strategies. As one business owner explained:

“Last week, I e-mailed [the CBC Connector] to help me connect with an accountant. I wanted to talk with an accountant for 10 hours free because now I’m paying for the bookkeeping. Bookkeeping service is quite a lot for me at the beginning. If I can get this service, it will help me.”





Industry-Specific Support

Some small business owners expressed frustration with the generalized nature of networking opportunities and business connections facilitated through the CBC program.

While small business owners acknowledged the value of diverse business perspectives, they consistently emphasized the need for more targeted connections within their specific industries or complementary business sectors.

This gap created a significant barrier to developing the types of strategic partnerships and referral networks that could directly support growing their business.

The absence of industry-specific support particularly affected service-based businesses that rely heavily on cross-referrals and collaborative opportunities. For these small business owners, general business networking provided limited practical value compared to connections with complementary service providers. A small business owner articulated this challenge clearly:

“People who join the meetings are usually from businesses like tax services, real estate agents, or financial planning, a business that I don’t feel is related to my field... I think it would be more beneficial to network with people in the _____ or events or _____— things that we are all—maybe in the similar fields of _____.”



The same business owner further noted:

“I wish that they would know more people so that they can refer me to different people that—more in my field. Right now, I feel like I’m not getting where I would like to be because I’m not reaching out or having the people to support me in this business.”





Service Delivery Format

Business owners expressed that the program’s predominant service delivery format—in-person meetings—created access barriers limiting their ability to use available services. This challenge stemmed from practical constraints—such as time limitations and travel difficulties—and preferences for more diverse engagement modalities to accommodate different learning and networking styles. The service delivery format particularly affected small business owners with considerable time constraints or those located farther from where meetings were convened.

Several business owners suggested that more flexible and varied service delivery options would significantly increase program accessibility and impact.

As one small business owner offered:

“More meetings, more new people to talk to, more events, maybe, and different entities of that nature...Some one-on-ones, maybe. Meet- and-greets. I think these things could be relevant.” ”

This sentiment reflects a desire for both more opportunities and greater diversity in engagement formats.



Recommendations

The table outlines recommendations to improve the CBC program based on the insights and experiences of small business owners. The table is organized into three columns: recommendation, rationale, and action steps.

These recommendations directly address the key challenges identified across all five small business owner interviews, with particular attention to barriers that affected multiple business owners. Importantly, these suggestions represent an emergent framework for addressing challenges directly grounded in small business owners' lived experiences.

This approach ensures the proposed recommendations authentically reflect small business owner needs rather than imposing predetermined interventions. Each recommendation responds to specific needs expressed by small business owners while considering the practical constraints of program implementation.

The actionable steps are strategies aimed at enhancing the CBC program, strengthening relationships with trusted Community Business Connectors, improving the support offered, and allowing for the inclusivity of small businesses in King County, Washington, to launch, grow, and sustain.

Recommendation	Rationale	Actionable Steps
1.		
Improve Program Accessibly	Business owners had scheduling conflicts	Offer flexible hours, virtual options, and on-site visits.
2.		
Expand Cultural and Language Support	Language barriers limit participation.	More collaboration with cultural business groups.
3.		
Develop Industry-Specific Support	Small business owners wanted networking within their fields	Create industry-focused tracks for targeted peer connections.
4.		
Provide Ongoing, Flexible Resources	Small business owners delayed using services to maximize benefits.	Offer an online resource library and peer networking spaces.

Service Provider Survey



Methods

Surveys were gathered between January 21 and February 20. All the surveys were anonymous and in the English language. We dropped 1 preview observation. This made for a total of 50 observations in the returned survey.

Respondent Profile



50

observations were included after dropping 2 incomplete entries



Only **40%**

(20 respondents) completed the entire survey



17%

Highest proportion were public agencies with significant representation from Technical Assistance Providers (38% including multiple categories) and Community-Based Organizations (28%)



14%

Private local businesses made up 14% of respondents

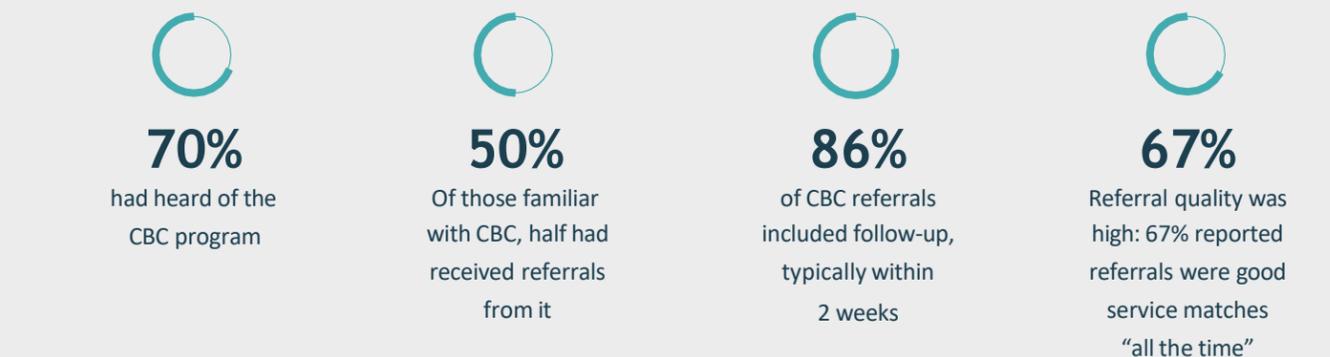
Summary of findings



Referral Process



Community Business Connector (CBC) Program



Services and Business Focus



Collaboration



The consistent themes throughout the survey were the desire for better knowledge sharing, more connections between service providers, and increased collaboration.



Recommendation

1.



Have regularly scheduled meetings between connectors in order to ensure that referrals can be made in an optimal and timely manner And that knowledge can be exchanged between partners.

2.



Identify micro and growing revenue businesses that would be interested in the services of the connectors so that focus can be maintained on existing businesses and those in greatest need can be spotlighted.

3.



Create a centralized website that explains what the various connectors and service do that explains who should be referred where for what service the fee structures and what eligibility requirements are necessary for each referral opportunity so that time isn't wasted if a particular business isn't eligible for a service and that information can be easily accessed by all parties.

4.



Ensure that the CBC stays up to date on staff changes at the various service providers.

5.



Increase collaborative opportunities between business connectors service providers and businesses through quarterly reports, meeting for knowledge exchanges, and task forces.

6.



Increase awareness of business connector program and ensure that all service areas providers an available business service referral agencies are connected to program.

7.



Identify training opportunities and create standardized protocols to ensure consistency and support intake and referral process

8.



Develop a resource partner network to improve collaboration amongst service providers.

Connector Listening Session



Enhancing Support for Connectors and Small Businesses

Participants appeared to be dedicated to the work that is happening at the CBC pilot program and often spoke of the benefits that they had observed among the small business owners being supported. The conversations that came out of the interviews hinted at opportunities for developing and enhancing a sense of community among connectors and small business owners.

Connectors could benefit from trainings, in-services, scheduled meetings, and networking events. Similarly, small business owners could benefit from trainings and networking events.

For connectors, trainings could be used for onboarding new connectors. Considering that goals of the program are specifically aimed at supporting certain members of the small business community, it might be useful to develop a training for service providers so that they understand the importance of their role in the support process. In-services can be used as a form of continuing education for connectors to keep them abreast of changes in policies and protocols and any new information that could support them in their work with small business owners.

Scheduled meetings would be an opportunity for connectors to offer one another peer support and troubleshoot difficult scenarios. Connectors can also share information about resources, including feedback about the quality of the services being recommended to clients. Networking events are different from scheduled meetings in that the networking events are opportunities for connectors to socialize on a professional level and celebrate the work that they do.

Some of the participants mentioned that they are presently providing small business owners with coaching sessions and trainings, but it appeared to be something that was initiated by the connector or may have been a group effort by people at a particular hub. It is possible to formalize the trainings considering how perennial some of the issues faced by small business owners tend to be.

To avoid wasting resources, it would be helpful to partner with local business owners and develop trainings that center their interests while providing them with information that they need. These actions could take shape as a form of capacity building within the small business community in that they stand to become more empowered and self-sufficient as a result.

For small business owners, networking events are also a space for them to socialize professionally. Additionally, the events could be opportunities for small business owners to interact with connectors, service providers, and local leaders.

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We extend our sincere thanks to all the business owners, service providers, and Connectors who contributed their time, insights, and experience to this evaluation.

Your candid feedback has been invaluable in helping us understand the impact of the CBC pilot and identify ways to enhance our efforts in supporting regional collaboration and small business success.

Your voices are central to shaping the future of this work, and we remain committed to learning, improving and growing together.

Thank you for your partnership.