



Investment Connection creates funding opportunity for Lincoln, Neb., nonprofit

by: Rachael Surmick

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ECHO Collective staff and students celebrate the opening of Refined & Co, offering artisanal products made by entrepreneurs who have graduated from ECHO entrepreneurship programs.

Five years ago, Kelly Ross saw a problem and an opportunity. She was teaching English Language Learning classes when one of her students shared that she wanted to start a business, but faced three key challenges:

- Lack of business education for English Language Learners;
- Lack of understanding of local business laws and regulations; and
- Access to social capital and community supports.

From there, the idea for ECHO Collective was born. Today, the organization provides entrepreneurship education and coaching to prepare refugee and immigrant women for accessing capital from local Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) and to build a strong foundation for a successful business. Recognizing that many of the program graduates need a steppingstone before accessing mainstream financial services for their small businesses, the organization has a strong partnership with a Lincoln-based CDFI, Community Development Resources, to provide Small Business Administration and KIVA lending products.

In April of 2025, Ross shared ECHO Collective's story to a room full of funders during an Investment Connection event, which led to new funding to support the organization's programs.



Kelly Ross, founder and executive director, ECHO Collective

What is Investment Connection?

In 2011, the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City developed Investment Connection, a unique forum for nonprofits to present Community Reinvestment Act-relevant programs to banks and other potential funders. The goal of the program is to create opportunities for financial institutions, government agencies, corporate enterprises, and community foundations to learn about grant, investment, and service opportunities with organizations serving lower-income communities and households.

One of the hallmark components of Investment Connection is a live event where nonprofit organizations pitch their community development proposals to funders. The events are held across the 10th District throughout the year. These meetings, and the [Investment Connection online portal](#), have facilitated more than \$80 million in funding to community-based organizations.

Ready, set, pitch

ECHO Collective was one of eight organizations that pitched their programs to a room full of funders in Lincoln, Neb., in April 2025. There, Ross told ECHO Collective's story: an intensive entrepreneurship education program that serves lower income households, with 56 curriculum touchpoints across seven modules, 54 program graduates, and 88% of graduates still operating their business.

"Investment Connection is a unique opportunity to connect with people who care deeply about on-the-ground organizations making a difference," Ross said. She offered advice to others with an opportunity to pitch. "Prepare your story clearly, follow up quickly, and treat it as the beginning of a relationship. For us, it opened doors to partners who believe in financial literacy and empowerment."



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From pitch to connection

Funders were interested in the ECHO Collective pitch. At the end of each Investment Connection event, funders say which organizations they would like to connect with after the event. Staff at the Kansas City Fed share those funders and their contact information with the presenting organization. The nonprofit organization then reaches out to establish a connection and, hopefully, an investment relationship.

One of those funders was First National Bank of Omaha (FNBO).

“The timing of ECHO Collective’s presentation at Investment Connection in Lincoln aligned perfectly with the launch of our Impact Grant application process,” Christina Kahler said. Kahler is managing director, marketing and philanthropy at FNBO. “After hearing their compelling story, FNBO’s City Ambassador in Lincoln, Tom Klein, connected with the organization and introduced them to the Impact Grant opportunity. He recognized that ECHO Collective’s programming was a strong fit for our workforce development priorities, which allowed the partnership to move forward quickly.”

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<https://www.kansascityfed.org/community/community-connections/investment-connection-creates-funding-opportunity-for-lincoln-neb-nonprofit/>



Christina Kahler, managing director, marketing and philanthropy at FNBO

FNBO's \$10,000 grant is supporting ECHO Collective's Refinery program, which equips women entrepreneurs with the tools and confidence to grow their businesses. Ross said that this grant "strengthens ECHO Collective's long-term sustainability so we can continue walking alongside more women in their journey toward independence."

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Maximize your Investment Connection opportunity

Investment Connection has a history of success in connecting nonprofit organizations with a myriad of investment opportunities, but it requires preparation and some elbow grease on the part of nonprofits. Both Ross and Kahler shared their advice for organizations considering submitting a pitch.

“After Investment Connection, I followed up right away with FNBO by email and then met with their staff directly,” Ross said. She shared how ECHO Collective empowers refugee and immigrant women to achieve financial independence. “Those conversations helped us build a genuine connection that led to investment.”

“Use this opportunity to share your story - both the impact you’re making and the vision that drives your mission - and to build relationships with other organizations and financial institutions in the room,” Kahler said. “It’s also helpful to have a basic understanding of the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA), as that knowledge can help you position your programs and opportunities in ways that align with banks’ community development priorities. Everyone attending shares a common goal of strengthening the community, and you never know when a conversation might spark a partnership - whether in the near future or further down the road.”

Author



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Rachael Surmick is a community development advisor for the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City in the Omaha Branch Office. Surmick joined the team in October 2023. She focuses her time on better understanding housing affordability challenges for lower income households and the structural challenges facing developers in creating more affordable housing stock across the District. She also serves as the Bank's lead liaison for the [Federal Reserve System's Small Business Credit Survey](#). Surmick began her career as an AmeriCorps VISTA member working to alleviate poverty through financial well-being programs in southwestern Pennsylvania. She has worked in the nonprofit community development sector for more than a decade, primarily focused on affordable housing. A Pennsylvania native, Surmick studied history and anthropology as an undergraduate student at Gettysburg College and earned a Master of Public Management degree from Carnegie Mellon University. Outside of work, Surmick is passionate about music and plays the clarinet with a local community concert band.

About the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City The Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City is one of 12 regional Reserve Banks that, along with the Board of Governors in Washington, D.C., make up our nation's central bank. We work in the public's interest by supporting economic and financial stability. The Kansas City Fed's territory includes Colorado, Kansas, western Missouri, Nebraska, northern New Mexico, Oklahoma and Wyoming. Our headquarters is in Kansas City, with branch offices in Denver, Omaha and Oklahoma City. The Kansas City Fed Community Development Department promotes economic development and public understanding that leads to progress for lower-income individuals and communities. Our focus areas include community development investments, digital inclusion, small business / entrepreneurship, and workforce development.