

New program offers free support for entrepreneurs in Washtenaw, Livingston, Monroe counties

SARAH RIGG | WEDNESDAY, APRIL 9, 2025

From increasing search engine traffic to overcoming burnout, small business owners in Washtenaw County and beyond are benefiting from Ann Arbor SPARK's new Small Business Support program.



Gordon "Big" Dooley

Gordon "Big" Dooley with merchandise from his clothing line, Husky Life. Free coaching from the Small Business Success program helped Dooley refine his business plan.

From increasing search engine traffic to overcoming burnout, small business owners in Washtenaw County and beyond are benefiting from Ann Arbor SPARK's new Small Business Support (SBS) program. SPARK launched the program in 2024 with a \$3.4 million three-year grant from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation.

Kristine Nash-Wong, director of entrepreneurial services at SPARK East, says the program runs on a "strong network of community partners." In Washtenaw County, those partners include Jewish Family Services, the Michigan Small Business Development Center's Uplift Michigan program, and the Washtenaw Community College Entrepreneurship Center. SBS' aim is to provide critical resources in areas like marketing, capital access, and business growth.

In SBS' first year, Nash-Wong says, the program provided consulting, education, and support services to 237 small businesses, representing about 300 full-time workers, across Washtenaw, Monroe, and Livingston counties. More than 60% of participating businesses were women- or minority-owned. The program helped participating businesses net \$185,000 in follow-on funding and grants, and supported 18 new business launches.



courtesy Ann Arbor SPARK

Ann Arbor SPARK East Director of Entrepreneurial Services Kristine Nash-Wong.

Nash-Wong says SBS allowed SPARK to work even more closely with existing community partners.

"I know exactly who to provide a warm introduction to based on what each business needs," she says. "There's a 'no wrong door' policy. If you show up at one place and need a business plan but they don't provide that, they'll provide you with a warm introduction to the right community partner that does."

A therapist learns to love what she does all over again

Christina Herbin, founder of Harmony Counseling in Ann Arbor, was trying to decide if she wanted to keep going or call it quits when she encountered the SBS program. She says she was "getting a little burned out" as she entered her 10th year as a therapist.

"The clinical side is easy, but the business side is more challenging, because I didn't have much background in that," she says. "The [SBS] coach really helped to reignite my passion. There's such a need for more counseling services, and she suggested that I make the business my own and make sure I'm supporting the clients I want to support."

Herbin says the coaching she received through Uplift Michigan helped "provide clarity." Her practice focuses on supporting young adults' mental health as they transition to adulthood. Herbin wanted to branch out into offering mental health workshops, and coaching helped her figure out a roadmap to do so.

"The program basically helped me think through the ways to maximize my success as a business owner, whether it's reaching out to a lawyer to look over documents or an accountant to look at my profits and losses through the year," she says.

Herbin says she'd never written out a formal business plan before partnering with SBS, but her coach helped her do that as well.

"Writing it helped me to see more about my value and what I have to offer as a clinician," she says. "The business coach helped me realize that I can serve who I want to serve and to pay attention to what lights my flame. She really helped me to love what I do again."

A business owner's website shoots to the top of web searches

For Elizabeth Levy, owner of Essay Help for Colleges, one of the clearest signs of success from the SBS program was seeing her website rocket into the top three results on search engines.

Levy was a guidance counselor in Whitmore Lake Public Schools for many years. When she retired, she launched a business helping students write college essays.



Elizabeth Levy

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It's now Levy's third year in business. She says she's seen the highest number of students between May 2024 and February 2025, after working with a coach from Jewish Family Services through SBS. That was due in part to advice she received about improving her social media presence and learning to work more creatively with online tools like Zoom.

"They gave me recommendations of businesses to work with, and they'd check in with me to see how it was going and if there was any support I needed," Levy says. "I highly recommend the program, especially if you need to focus on one specific area where you want to grow your business."

A comedian finds a new direction for his e-commerce site

Gordon "Big" Dooley is best known as an Ypsilanti-based comedian, but his career took a hit during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The stage was taken away from me. I had no income," he says.

He already had an e-commerce site called Husky Life, selling plus-sized apparel for men. He'd also formed an LLC, but he says the site was stagnant.

"It lacked focus and direction," Dooley says.

Dooley says Cheranissa Williams, his SBS coach from the WCC Entrepreneurship Center, made him realize that "the business plan I had written was not the actual business I was doing." He'd had particular trouble with forecasting his sales.

"[Williams] took what I had and basically destroyed every fear and inhibition I had in writing this business plan," he says. "The coach is really there for you every step of the way, removing fears and asking what is holding you up. They give you opportunities to overcome every roadblock."

Dooley says Williams asked him 10 questions and had him write down his answers. She told him that was his business plan. She also helped him analyze past sales, the current state of the economy, and his product release dates to get a realistic forecast of his sales.

"I was stuck and stagnant, but now I have a three-, six-, nine-, and 12-month plan and goals, and daily tasks for me as a business owner to complete," he says. "They're giving you the tools you need to succeed. No more lack of direction. I know what I'm doing and exactly how I'm trying to get there."

Read more about the SBS program [here](#).

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