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# EQUITY IMPACT PLAN ANNUAL REPORT

## CALENDAR YEAR 2024

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Department Name: Department of Economic Initiatives

Equity Lead(s): Theresa Benincasa

Date: November 27, 2024

### EQUITY IMPACT PLAN REPORT

**Goal 1: Implement the THRIVE Small Business Technical Assistance Program that includes serving underrepresented small businesses and entrepreneurs.**

Goal 1 Progress:

In 2024, the Department of Economic Initiatives (DEI) in partnership with the Latino Economic Development Center (LEDC) implemented the THRIVE Small Business Technical Assistance Grant Program (THRIVE). THRIVE provides small local businesses with up to \$20,000 in business counseling and consulting services to help them continue their post-pandemic recovery and meet their business goals. THRIVE is supported with American Rescue Plan Act funds, approved by Fairfax County's Board of Supervisors. At every stage, in the planning and execution of THRIVE, DEI has focused on strategies to engage and serve racially and ethnically diverse business owners and underserved small businesses.

The THRIVE program was implemented in two phases. In 2023, THRIVE administered a highly successful procurement process, which resulted in recruiting eight business coaching firms and 52 industry experts specializing in business consulting services in marketing, financial planning and business operations. In the first quarter of 2024, DEI and LEDC partnered to identify and recruit eligible county businesses to participate in THRIVE, work with business coaches to identify their priority business needs, and then match participating small businesses to consulting services tailored to those needs.

DEI implemented a countywide marketing campaign to promote the THRIVE program to reach small, local and minority-owned businesses. This included specially developed promotional materials, translated into Spanish. THRIVE hosted webinars on the application process in Spanish and English. THRIVE tried new strategies to reach businesses, including paid social media advertising and radio ads on WTOP. Outreach included promotion through the county's network of chambers, community and multicultural groups, Economic Development Authority (EDA), the Mason Small Business Development Center, the Community Business Partnership as well as robust promotion through the Board of Supervisors and county communications.

LEDC developed a one-stop online portal for businesses to apply and receive support during the application process and service delivery. An online platform was also created for coaches and consultants, providing them with a central place to communicate about individual businesses, develop work plans, track progress and invoice. Service delivery began in earnest in May 2024, and will continue through an

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## CALENDAR YEAR 2024

ARPA extension through March 2025. To date, the majority of businesses have received at least one consulting service, and many have received two or more services, with a total value up to \$20,000.

### **Goal 1 Highlights**

**THRIVE participation:** 313 small businesses completed the THRIVE grant application. Of these, 183 were assessed as eligible and elected to participate in the program. Efforts to reach women and minority-owned businesses were successful. Sixty percent of participants that reported are minority-owned businesses; (Asian, 30%; Black, 20%, Hispanic, 6%, Multiracial, 4%, Native American/Pacific Islander, <1%; White 40%); 59% are women.

**THRIVE coaching services:** 183 businesses received personalized coaching about their individual business needs, an assessment of their business health across marketing, finance, management and operations, and were then matched with their priority for business services that would help them reach their business goals.

**THRIVE services delivered:** Businesses received multiple services (typically 2 to 3 services per business). To date, 491 workplans have been approved. Of the workplans approved, 79% were for marketing, 11% for financial planning and 10% for business operations. Popular business service areas included digital presence improvements, website development and branding, reflecting business interest in attracting new customers through a competitive online presence.

**THRIVE Education webinars:** In addition to service delivery, LEDC developed four online courses for businesses: marketing, finance and accounting, management and business operations. These training sessions will be available to all county businesses through Fairfax CORE, DEI's new small business resource navigator.

In 2025, THRIVE will complete service delivery, allowing participating businesses to maximize their use of available ARPA grant funds. DEI and LEDC will partner on program evaluation, and report on all aspects of the program to county stakeholders and the public.

To learn more: [Fairfax County Introduces THRIVE | Department of Economic Initiatives](#)

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# EQUITY IMPACT PLAN ANNUAL REPORT

## CALENDAR YEAR 2024

### **Goal 2: Improve access to capital and technical expertise for diverse businesses.**

#### Goal 2 Progress:

In 2024, DEI managed the second cohort of the Fairfax Founders Fund (FFF). FFF is a grant and technical assistance program that awards up to \$50,000 to early-stage product-based companies that are on a high-growth trajectory. Outreach includes intentional engagement with under-represented founders and regional networks.

In the second cohort, FFF received 63 applications across a wide range of technologies including Information Technology; Cybersecurity; Communications; Autonomous Systems; Life and Health Sciences; Energy, Learning and Cognition Technologies; Ag-tech; and others.

Applications from under-represented founders including women, veterans, founders with disabilities, and founders of color were over-represented in almost every category compared to Fairfax County demographics, indicating outreach may have contributed to increased applications from these groups.

In other work to foster the entrepreneurial ecosystem and attract venture capital, DEI, EDA, and county partners support the George Mason University Accelerate Innovation Breakfast series. This quarterly event features investment pitches from five carefully selected high-growth companies. Early-stage investors and industry leaders gain valuable insights into emerging technologies, while entrepreneurs receive crucial exposure and potential funding avenues. The Accelerate Breakfast Series plays a vital role in strengthening Fairfax County's thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem and driving investment in local innovation. Two of the Fairfax Founder grantees, Near Star Fusion and Healp, presented at the inaugural Accelerate Innovation Breakfast event held in April 2024.

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# EQUITY IMPACT PLAN ANNUAL REPORT

## CALENDAR YEAR 2024

### **Goal 2 Highlights**

**2024 Founders Fund applicants are diverse:** 18% Black, 13% Asian Pacific, 11% Subcontinent Asian, 13% multiethnic; 3% Hispanic; 25% had no minority members, and 17% did not report. More than half of the applicants are women, 10% report having a disability and 8% are veterans.

**Eight start-ups received FFF grants:** [Karambit.AI](#), Annandale, VA; [PLURIBUS Inc.](#), McLean, VA; [ZipID, Inc.](#), Alexandria, VA; [KAPPA AgTech](#), Vienna, VA; [Magna Labs Inc.](#), Falls Church, VA; [NanoNiFe LLC](#), Vienna, VA; [NIOSolutions Inc.](#), McLean, VA and [Saltenna LLC](#), McLean, VA

**Past FFF winners report achieving exciting growth milestones** including:

- The procurement of composite materials for testing and quality control
- Mobile app improvements and social media strategies implemented
- Patent applications drafted
- Local sales consultant hired
- Partnership with Google developed
- Patient recruitment campaigns launched resulting in an exponential increase in online patients
- New revenue generation strategies executed

To learn more: [Fairfax Founders Fund | Department of Economic Initiatives \(fairfaxcounty.gov\)](#)

**Goal 3: Structure and promote a platform and other activities to help entrepreneurs, home-based businesses and small businesses, including minority-owned businesses to connect to available resources.**

Goal 3 Progress:

In 2024, DEI successfully launched Fairfax CORE (Connecting Opportunities and Resources for Entrepreneurs), a comprehensive entrepreneur and business support resource platform. This free online platform empowers entrepreneurs at all stages to start, grow and scale their businesses. Fairfax CORE was developed in response to significant challenges faced by entrepreneurs, including minority-owned founders, to find the resources they need at the right time. CORE provides access to free and low-cost learning and networking opportunities, direct connection to more than 120 business support professionals and resources, and helpful business start-up and growth guides. CORE includes resources specifically targeted to women and minority-owned businesses. Top searches for specific populations have been for business resources that support women, Black or African American, Asians, Veterans, Hispanics and people with disabilities.

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# EQUITY IMPACT PLAN ANNUAL REPORT

## CALENDAR YEAR 2024

Also in 2024, DEI continued its long-standing partnerships to provide educational resources and increase awareness of business opportunities. For example, for the third year, DEI co-hosted Ignite!, an education series for small businesses in partnership with the Patrick Henry Library and the Town of Vienna Economic Development Department. Forty-two local businesses and entrepreneurs participated in Ignite!. This year's event focused on how businesses can navigate strategic expansion.

DEI continued to promote the Department of Procurement and Materials Management (DPMM) Vendor Pitch Portal (VPP). VPP offers businesses a centralized platform to connect with county agencies as potential customers. DEI also responds directly to inquiries from entrepreneurs seeking assistance related to county business, licensing and permitting processes.

### **Goal 3 Highlights**

Through October 2024 CORE attracted 7,000 visitors and facilitated 135 successful connections between businesses and support organizations. Top referrals include the Mason Small Business Development Center, the Women's Business Center of Northern Virginia, and the Community Business Partnership. These organizations excel at offering services to women and minority business owners and entrepreneurs.

#### **2024 CORE Engagement:**

- 30,000 page views by nearly 7,000 users
- 350 educational events by 37 different organizations advertised
- New monthly newsletter that reached 5000+ subscribers
- Direct assistance to 300 individual clients

In 2025, DEI will prioritize on-the-ground marketing and work with local leaders and business support organizations to promote CORE for county entrepreneurs and small businesses.

To learn more: [Fairfax County Launches Fairfax CORE | Department of Economic Initiatives](#)

**Goal 4: Build and collaborate on place-led economic development efforts, utilizing unique assets within communities to understand and nurture economic activity, empowering local stakeholders/residents, and supporting economically competitive places.**

Goal 4 Progress:

**McLean Project for the Arts Downtown Arts and Education Center:** DEI facilitated the Board appropriation of \$500,000 of Economic Opportunity Reserve funding to create the McLean Project for the

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Arts (MPA) Downtown Arts & Education Center. The Center aims to transform vacant retail space and outdoor patio area into a cultural landmark. The proposed MPA Arts & Education Center includes galleries, teaching space, ceramic studio, café, and a retail sales area. The facility will also coordinate with community partners such as the McLean Revitalization Corporation, Fairfax County Park Authority, and Fairfax County Department of Planning and Development to provide community programming and activation in the adjacent park and outdoor space.

DEI drafted an equity impact statement for the Board Authorization (Authorization of Economic Opportunity Reserve Funding to McLean Project for the Arts Downtown Arts & Education Center Projects, Board Action, September 24, 2024), which recognizes that the MPA has a long-standing history of considering equity in delivering programs and services to schools and communities, which will continue in the new Downtown Arts & Education Center. This ethic is exemplified by their award-winning ArtReach program which provides arts education and awareness activities to over 3,000 attendees annually. This program primarily serves students, at-risk youth, seniors, those who are physically challenged, and those with special needs with gallery visits and hands-on art activities. The program is offered to schools free of charge, providing free transportation to MPA's galleries for Title 1 FCPS schools, which are designated as "at-risk" schools with a large number of English as second language students or have student body populations that have higher percentages of qualifications for free or reduced lunches.

**Tysons Community Alliance (TCA):** After facilitating the development of a new organization dedicated to improving place-based economic development in Tysons in 2023, DEI continues to support and partner on the work of the TCA in its first year of operations. A goal of the TCA is to further transform the Tysons economic hub into a livable, walkable and residential community, including the development of the first 100% affordable housing community in Tysons and making improvements to the sidewalk and pedestrian environment. A core tenant of the TCA is community engagement, with specific emphasis on hearing from residents who have not traditionally been involved in Tysons development activities.

**Bunnyman Brewing at the Workhouse:** DEI played a pivotal role in the opening of a new brewery at the Workhouse Arts Center by leading lease negotiations and assisting the tenant through a complex regulatory process. The Bunnyman Brewing Cafe offers a new gathering place for visitors and county residents, while contributing to the programming and activation goals of the Workhouse Arts Campus and the development of the surrounding community in Lorton.

**Goal 5: With the Department of Family Services (DFS), implement the Talent Up Fairfax Fund to provide economic opportunities to unemployed or underemployed workers.**

Goal 5 Progress:

In 2024, DEI collaborated with the Skill Source Group, Inc. (SSG) and DFS on implementing the Talent Up Fairfax Fund (Talent Up), a new workforce initiative designed to connect local employers with diverse

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jobseekers through paid internships. Employers tailor Talent Up internships to their specific organization's needs, with Talent Up funding wages and workers' compensation at competitive rates (\$20/hour minimum) for typically 8-14 weeks. Job seekers gain valuable experience in high-demand fields such as IT, healthcare, and business operations; career coaching; and the potential for full-time positions. The program is a powerful model for addressing post-pandemic workforce challenges while promoting diversity and building a stronger, more resilient economy.

Targeting “gateway” jobs – those with numerous job openings and the potential for growth – Talent Up focuses on occupations accessible to people with diverse skills and backgrounds, fostering economic mobility. These include entry-level and mid-level positions in Information Technology, Healthcare, Finance, Sales, Marketing, Customer Service, Administration and Business Operations.

In 2024, DEI with the program administrator, Skill Source Group marketed Talent Up widely through the County, partnering with the EDA and chambers of commerce to promote the opportunity to county employers. SSG established a dedicated online job market to post internship opportunities. Talent Up has worked with local nonprofits, NOVA community college and workforce partners to host employer and jobseeker information sessions and job fairs. To reach diverse jobseekers, Talent Up marketed the program through bus tail advertising and social media. The program has been well-received by employers and jobseekers alike, with over 100 internships created, customized and successfully filled within its first year of operation.

### **Goal 5 Highlights**

**Employer Engagement:** Over 200+ employers from diverse sectors are engaged with the Talent Up program. The majority are small to medium-sized private sector companies as well as large employers such as the County government and multiple nonprofits.

**Jobseeker Engagement:** Approximately 270 jobseekers met the eligibility criteria and are currently enrolled in Talent Up; over 900 job seekers have expressed interest.

**Jobseekers:** At the program mid-point, Talent Up applicants were 28% white, 24% Asian, 17% African American, and 10% Hispanic. Eleven percent reported having a disability; 26% were on public assistance. All jobseekers are connected to Virginia Career Works Northern workforce resources, beyond Talent Up.

**Internships:** To date, over 125 internship opportunities have been established and 102 jobseekers have been placed in a Talent Up internship. Data on permanent hires will be available in 2025, as internships are being completed. The program has been extended through June 2025.

To learn more: [TalentUp Fairfax | Elevating Opportunities, Empowering Talent](#)

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### OTHER EQUITY-RELATED WORK

DEI supports One Fairfax equity goals through research, policy analysis and program operations. These efforts are frequently done in collaboration with other county agencies and external partners and form the basis for future Equity Goals and programs.

#### **Fairfax County/Urban Institute Upward Mobility Learning Action Network**

Led by One Fairfax, Fairfax County was selected to participate in the Urban Institute’s Upward Mobility Learning Action Network. DEI along with other county agencies worked with the Urban Institute to establish a comprehensive framework to support county residents on their path to greater economic prosperity. This effort has strengthened interagency and cross-sector partnerships and established a common set of metrics to track progress and drive accountability for achieving equitable outcomes for all residents.

#### **Guaranteed Basic Income Pilot - Economic Mobility Network**

Building on the success of the Guaranteed Basic Income Pilot, DEI is working with county partners to strengthen the systems that support residents’ economic mobility, with a focus on the ALICE population. ALICE stands for “asset limited, income constrained, employed.”

Led by DFS, One Fairfax and the United Way NCA, this effort is identifying the systemic barriers that limit the ALICE population from building their economic mobility. The working group is also raising awareness about their needs, identifying resources that increase economic mobility and laying the groundwork for systems change.

#### **BluePrint for the Future – Economic Analysis and Strategic Planning**

A key component of DEI’s strategy is understanding the county’s economic makeup and areas of opportunity. In 2024, DEI partnered with Camoin Associates Consulting to develop the Blueprint for the Future, including a comprehensive sector analysis and recommendations for the Department’s focus and positioning to support the County’s sustainable, equitable and resilient economic competitiveness. Through the Blueprint industry analysis, the consulting team identified the makeup of the county’s small businesses community as well as the demographics of workers in the county’s most competitive industry clusters. This assessment will inform the development of new initiatives to support future programs or policies, including those to facilitate wealth-building and equitable development.

#### **Communities of Opportunity Leadership Learning Cohort**

DEI is participating in the Communities of Opportunity Leadership Learning Cohort, convened and led by the One Fairfax Team. The initiative aims to build the understanding and capacity of Fairfax County government leaders to overcome institutional and systemic barriers that connect people to opportunity, improve connections to county assets, and facilitate their full participation in the county’s economic and social vitality. The cohort meets monthly to share insights and collectively devise solutions. The focus is on one specific community, and the work will set a framework for how the county shows up in other similarly situated neighborhoods across the county.