

JUST
TRANSITION
FUND

2026 Local Economy Lab Request for Proposals: Entrepreneurship & Small Business Support

Deadline: June 12



ABOUT THE JTF

2026 ENTREPRENEURSHIP & SMALL BUSINESS SUPPORT CYCLE

The Just Transition Fund is on a mission to create economic opportunity for the frontline communities and workers hardest hit by the transition away from coal.

We know that coal community recovery requires investment across multiple fronts. Closures don't just eliminate jobs, they strip away tax revenue and the economic base on which communities depend. That's why our **Framework for Economic Transition** accelerates investment in three interconnected areas: workforce development, entrepreneurship and small business support, and place-based infrastructure.

Launched in 2025, our **Local Economy Lab** is our central hub for helping coal communities seed, grow, and scale transformative economic projects across all three areas. Through this **Entrepreneurship & Business Support RFP**—one of three we're launching this year—we're investing in bold, community-driven approaches to entrepreneurship and business development that create lasting local ownership and prosperity. We will support projects at every stage of development, from early planning and piloting to full implementation and growth.

Whether you are testing a new idea or expanding a proven model, we want to hear from you! For more information on our other funding opportunities, and for help determining which RFP is right for you, visit justtransitionfund.org/local-economy-lab to check out our short guide.

We know that energy communities are facing a pervasive skills and workforce gap as closures occur and communities look toward diversification strategies.

In this funding cycle, we will support innovative, community-led entrepreneurship and business development projects that draw on proven strategies to build locally owned economic opportunities in coal communities. Based on what we've learned from leading practitioners across the country, we're prioritizing two approaches: providing direct support for individual entrepreneurs and businesses and building the competitive industry sectors that generate lasting jobs.

1. Industry Cluster Development

Strategies that build competitive, locally anchored industry clusters—connecting manufacturers, producers, and service providers into supply chains that create durable jobs and keep value circulating in the community.

2. Direct Business Support

Programs that help entrepreneurs start and grow businesses—combining incubation and acceleration for early-stage ventures with technical assistance, coaching, and capital access for existing small businesses at every stage of development.

FUNDING PRIORITIES

We welcome applications in either of the two priority areas. Projects that creatively combine elements across both priorities are strongly encouraged. While these priorities reflect our preferences, we will gladly accept other projects that meet the criteria.

Priority 1

Industry Cluster Development

Rural coal communities often have significant untapped assets—including natural resources, manufacturing infrastructure, skilled workers, and even geography—that can anchor competitive industry clusters if those assets are connected strategically. The most effective cluster-building efforts convene producers and businesses across a supply chain, identify market opportunities, build shared infrastructure, and create the coordination capacity that allows local enterprises to compete at scale.

We are looking for projects that build or expand locally anchored industry clusters in coal-impacted communities. Successful applicants will demonstrate:

- A clear theory of how cluster coordination creates competitive advantage and durable local jobs
- Meaningful convening of businesses across a supply chain or sector, with a track record of or commitment to cross-firm collaboration
- Strategies to connect local producers and manufacturers to regional, national, or export markets
- Defined goals for job creation, business growth, and local economic circulation

Strong cross-sector collaboration—from local government, anchor institutions, philanthropy, and existing businesses—is a key indicator of ecosystem health and will be weighted in our evaluation. Projects that build an export economy—connecting coal communities to larger regional or national markets—are especially encouraged.

Priority 2

Direct Business Support

The most direct investment we can make in coal community economic diversification is supporting entrepreneurs and small business owners at every stage—from the early-stage venture that needs structure and mentorship to survive its first years, to the established small business that needs capital and coaching to weather a hard stretch and grow. These challenges look different at different stages, but the goal is the same: locally owned enterprises that create quality jobs and keep wealth circulating in communities navigating major industrial change.

We are looking for projects that provide direct, accessible, and culturally appropriate support to entrepreneurs and small businesses across the full arc of development. Eligible activities include:

- Business incubation and acceleration programs that guide entrepreneurs from idea to launch—with cohort-based programming, clear milestones, mentorship, peer networks, and expert coaching across business planning, finance, marketing, and operations
- One-on-one and cohort-based coaching, financial literacy, and business planning support for existing small and micro-businesses
- Pathways to growth capital, including connections to angel investors, public funding sources, and community development finance institutions
- Support for businesses transitioning to employee ownership, cooperative structures, or succession models
- Targeted outreach to underserved entrepreneurs, including women- and BIPOC-owned businesses, as well as businesses in the most distressed communities

Successful applicants will demonstrate how their program reaches entrepreneurs and businesses that conventional services do not, and how it connects them to a path toward durable, locally owned economic opportunity. Projects that serve underrepresented entrepreneurs and integrate business development with workforce pathways are strongly encouraged.

SELECTION CRITERIA

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

The following examples show the types of projects we expect to support, across a range of sectors. These are illustrative, not exhaustive. Other projects that meet the criteria are strongly encouraged.

Successful projects will create a significant impact, either by growing a proven model or by creating and testing a new approach.

All proposals will be evaluated against the following criteria:

- **A bold, transformative vision.** Bold ideas with potential to transform local economic opportunity. Projects building an export economy—connecting coal communities to larger markets—are strongly encouraged.
- **Alignment with a growing sector.** We are sector agnostic, but will look for demonstrated growth potential and strong local fit.
- **Strong cross-sector collaboration.** Meaningful engagement from community-based organizations, local government, employers, and educational institutions.
- **Evidence of existing investment.** Secured or forthcoming financial commitment from public and/or private sources, from seed funding for early-stage projects to significant investment for proven models.
- **Potential to serve as a replicable model.** Approaches that could be adapted in other rural coal communities with limited access to financial resources and services.

Business Incubation: A coal community organization launches a hybrid business accelerator targeting entrepreneurs in outdoor economy, food, and creative industries. Participants receive structured cohort programming, one-on-one coaching, connections to regional mentors, and access to a revolving seed fund. The accelerator tracks business survival, revenue growth, and jobs created, and publishes its model for adaptation in other communities.

Small Business Technical Assistance: A CDFI and a local community partner create a support program for businesses that cannot access traditional financial services. The program provides one-on-one coaching, a matched savings program, and a micro-loan fund. Outreach is conducted in partnership with tribal nations and community-based organizations serving the hardest-to-reach entrepreneurs.

Industry Cluster Development: A regional nonprofit convenes manufacturers and suppliers across a sustainable textiles supply chain, building shared processing infrastructure, coordinating market access, and helping firms transition to circular economy practices. The initiative connects local businesses to national brands seeking domestic, sustainable supply chains, creating lasting export-market revenue in a historically coal-dependent region.

Integrated Model: A regional organization combines both approaches: direct business support through a business accelerator and small business loan fund, alongside an industry cluster initiative in outdoor recreation and food systems, creating a comprehensive, locally owned economic ecosystem that generates opportunity at every stage of business development.

INTERSECTIONS

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

OUTCOMES

A Note on the Workforce–Entrepreneurship Intersection

We know that entrepreneurship and workforce development are deeply intertwined in coal transition communities. Many of the most effective local organizations support both workers seeking jobs and residents building businesses. This RFP is focused on entrepreneurship, but we warmly welcome applications from organizations whose work spans both strategies. If your project integrates workforce training with small business development—such as a program that prepares workers to launch their own contracting businesses, or a co-op that employs community members while also building their ownership stakes—please tell us. Projects that serve underrepresented entrepreneurs and that integrate business development with workforce pathways are particularly encouraged. This intersection is a strength, not a complication.

Participation in the Local Economy Lab and the broader JTF network offers numerous benefits.

Flexible, one year grants that support a wide range of activities

Grants will generally range from \$50,000 to \$300,000, depending on project stage and funding need. If invited to submit a proposal, we will provide more guidance on the amount to request. This initiative is designed to be responsive to individual project needs and provides flexible funding for operating expenses. Please note that construction or capital expenses are not permitted.

Tailored technical assistance

Support based on individual project needs, including accessing public and private funding sources and frameworks for tracking and communicating impact.

Connection to a national peer network

Sponsored attendance at the JTF National Convening, plus access to peer learning and exchange with practitioners across the country.

We will support projects that create concrete economic outcomes for entrepreneurs and communities—the actual launch and growth of locally owned businesses that provide quality jobs and keep wealth circulating in coal-affected communities.

We will track metrics at the *individual* (entrepreneurs trained, jobs created, capital accessed), *program* (businesses created, number of businesses served), and *community* level (local economic circulation).

Fundamentally, we believe communities must also define their own terms for success, and we will collect metrics that project leaders consider most meaningful alongside these.

ELIGIBILITY

We are accepting applications for projects serving counties that are experiencing economic distress as a result of coal plant and/or mine closures, from organizations that are deeply rooted in coal-affected areas.

Qualified 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations, local governments, and Tribal governments are eligible to apply.

APPLICATION PROCESS & TIMELINE

Apply online with our application form.

To be considered, please submit your organization's details, along with a short two-page concept paper, via our [application form](#) or visit justtransitionfund.org/local-economy-lab.

The deadline to submit is June 12, 2026.

We will invite a select number of applicants to submit full proposals, and we will provide guidance on grant amount and timeline upon invitation. **Proposals will be evaluated on a rolling basis, and we encourage submissions prior to the deadline!**

QUESTIONS?

Contact Marissa Berkley at mberkley@justtransitionfund.org.