

Vermont Small Business Resource Platform: *Addressing Information Accessibility and Encouraging Engagement with Resource Organizations*

Leading Organizations (collectively described as the Women+ Small Business Owner Collaborative):

- Center for Women & Enterprise
- Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity
- Mercy Connections
- Vermont Commission on Women
- Vermont Professionals of Color
- Vermont Women's Fund
- Vermont Womenpreneurs (Lead Organizer)
- Vermont Works for Women

Additional Collaborating Organizations:

- Vermont Ecosystem Collaboration
- University of Vermont's Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships

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Overview

The Vermont Small Business Resource Platform transforms how entrepreneurs access and engage with business support services. Through an integrated approach combining "The Kit" - an annual magazine-style publication, and an AI-powered digital platform, we create pathways to make entrepreneurial resources more visible, accessible, and affordable for all Vermont business owners. Together, these tools address systemic challenges of fragmented communication, resource accessibility, and organizational capacity, fostering economic resilience through technology-enabled human collaboration.

Project Concept History

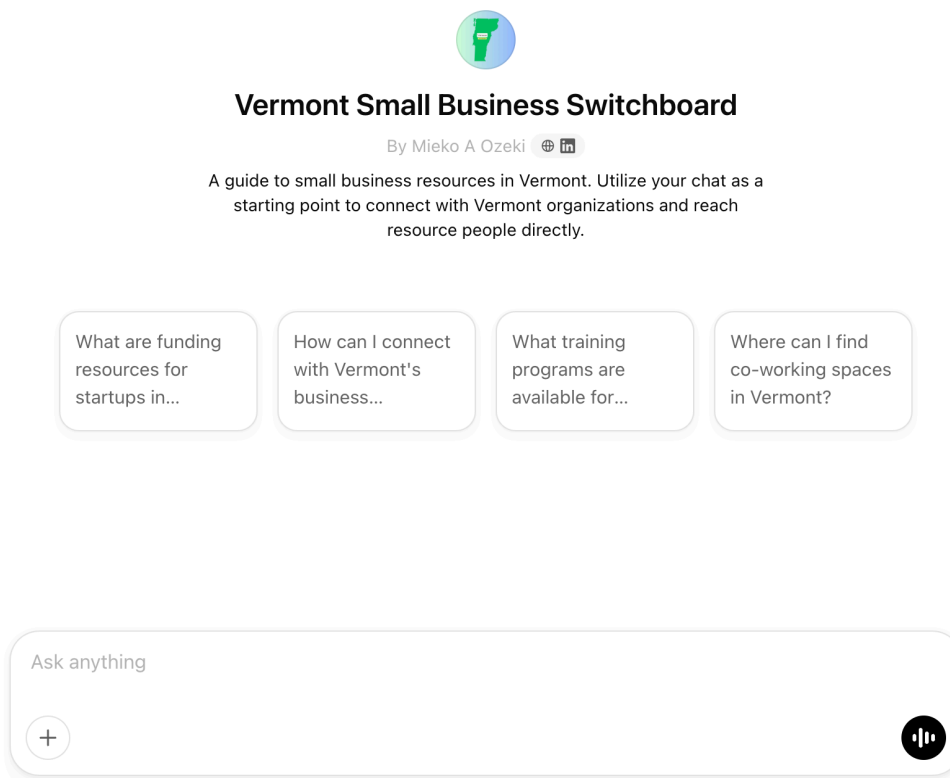
In 2024, eight Vermont business service organizations formed a collaborative to develop a centralized platform for entrepreneurs to access resources and connections needed for business success. Through a discovery workshop led by Game Theory (designers and builders of The Women's Fund's This Way Up platform), the collaborative identified an innovative approach to address long-standing systemic barriers in Vermont's business support ecosystem.

The annual Kit magazine emerged as a key component of this vision - designed to contextualize the services offered in the entrepreneurial ecosystem while also serving as an internal review mechanism for organizations. This dual purpose enables service providers to reflect on and refine their offerings for the year ahead, while sharing success stories that illuminate the real-world impact of their work. By combining practical information with meaningful narratives, The Kit creates a more accessible entry point to Vermont's business support system.

To validate the AI component of this approach, the collaborative experimented with a custom ChatGPT-based chatbot ([Vermont Small Business Switchboard](#)) as an initial point of contact for business owners. This pilot revealed critical requirements for the platform's AI agent:

- Ability to search internet resources while prioritizing Vermont-based solutions;
- Strong privacy protocols protecting users' personal and business information;
- System for resource organizations to maintain current information;
- Engaging conversation design that prepares users for productive human interactions.

These learnings directly inform the development requirements for the Small Business Resource Platform's AI capabilities.



Snapshot of VT Small Business Switchboard chatbot, a custom ChatGPT through ChatGPT Plus subscription; for demonstration purposes only.

After submitting our proposal and testimony to the VT Senate Economic Development Committee on February 26, 2025, we initiated discussions with Will Jeffries, who is assisting

with the development of the Vermont Ecosystem Collaboration. This partnership aligns with our shared goal to "facilitate collaboration between organizations that share a common goal" and "unlock significant opportunities for entrepreneurs to build and thrive in Vermont."

The Vermont Ecosystems Collaboration has expressed strong interest in developing the Small Business Resource Platform to effectively communicate the offerings of their participating organizations. Meanwhile, UVM's Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships has offered to support this initiative by providing:

- Resources for convening participating organizations;
- Internship assistance to help collect and organize information for the platform.

Additionally, the Vermont Women's Fund has indicated interest in financially supporting a dedicated project manager who would:

- Coordinate with various contractors;
- Oversee comprehensive project management;
- Ensure successful platform launch by December 1, 2026.

The Need

Research consistently shows that entrepreneurs from historically excluded communities face significant barriers in accessing business support services in Vermont:

- Only 2% of surveyed business owners utilize available business resources (This Way Up Survey, 2024);
- Fragmented information creates barriers to access and navigation;
- Limited organizational capacity reduces resource visibility and utilization;
- Systemic inequities disproportionately impact BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and rural entrepreneurs.

The Platform

Component 1: The Kit - Annual Publication (\$40,000) A magazine-style annual publication that orients business owners to Vermont's business support ecosystem through:

- In-depth profiles of service organizations with current programs and services
- Success stories highlighting diverse entrepreneurial journeys
- Practical guides and resource directories
- Strategic distribution through partner networks, libraries, and community hubs
- Digital and limited print formats

Component 2: Interactive Website (\$35,000) A dedicated digital hub that transforms The Kit's static content into a dynamic, user-friendly experience through:

- Real-time updates and searchable resources
- Seamless integration with existing state platforms

- Mobile-responsive design with accessibility features
- Multi-language support*
- Secure user dashboard

Component 3: AI-Powered Platform (\$25,000) An embedded AI system that creates technology-enabled collaboration through:

- Automated aggregation of time-sensitive events, grants, and programs
- Privacy-focused user experience
- Intelligent resource matching
- Structured pathways to human connections
- Educational content curation

*Additional funding or sponsorships may be required to fully implement multi-language support

Convening & Mapping Resource Organizations

The Platform will facilitate annual convenings of resource organizations alongside the Vermont Ecosystem Collaboration and with the support of the Leahy Institute. These gatherings will serve multiple purposes:

1. Collect comprehensive information from each organization on their mission, target audiences/constituents (categorized by trades, industry, or geographical region), and complete portfolio of services, programs, and workshops
2. Help organizations contextualize their engagement within Vermont's broader entrepreneurial ecosystem
3. Create visual mapping of these resources to improve visibility and understanding for all participating parties
4. Develop standardized organizational profiles that can be utilized across the Kit, website, and AI platform
5. Provide a structured opportunity for organizations to update their websites and communication platforms with current information that aligns with what they've shared during the convening

This consistent approach will ensure Vermont small business owners receive accurate, up-to-date information across all touchpoints.

Anticipated Impact

- Reach 27,204+ small businesses with under 20 employees (including solopreneurs);
- Increase resource utilization by 50% in Year 1;
- Improve accessibility for historically excluded entrepreneurs;
- Create sustainable infrastructure and communication for ongoing collaborations among Vermont's business resource organizations;
- Build lasting technology-enabled support systems.

Operating Costs and Future Funding

Short term costs to develop and launch this platform:

- A project manager will be sought to manage the project budget, work with contractors to implement each element of the project and deliver a functioning platform by December 1, 2026; Vermont Women's Fund is considering financially supporting the project manager role.
- Project manager would work with Vermont Women's Fund to fundraise additional funds to support the development and launch of this platform.

Long-term sustainability requires ongoing investment in personnel and technology:

- Platform Manager to maintain and promote content;
- Contractors for Kit design, publishing, and AI development;
- Regular platform maintenance and updates;

Future funding will need to be secured through a multi-channel approach:

- Foundation grants and partnerships;
- B2B company sponsorships;
- Platform licensing to other cities, states, or regions. For example, Edible Communities is a media organization that licenses its publication and media templates for local food scenes across different cities and states.

Total Request: \$100,000

Building on successful models while creating sustainable infrastructure to transform how Vermont entrepreneurs access and engage with business support services.