

NAVIGATOR C.O.R.E. HELP WANTED

Why Small Businesses Struggle to Receive the Support They Need

A Field Report from the Navigator C.O.R.E. Pilot Program
Network Navigator · Birmingham, Alabama · August 2025 to April 2026

Pilot Snapshot · Aug 2025 to Apr 2026

12 Entrepreneurs Served	17 TA Providers Engaged	250+ Applications Across the Ecosystem
9 Mo. Sustained TA Delivered	100% Cohort Completion Rate	\$9,416 Total Program Investment Per Entrepreneur
\$62 Cost Per Hour of TA Delivered to Local Providers		

THE REAL QUESTION

This Wasn't a Program Report. It Was a Live Experiment.

Lots of organizations serve small businesses. They hold workshops. They make referrals. They publish resource guides. What almost no one does is stay.

Navigator C.O.R.E. stayed. For nine months, Network Navigator ran a live test of what actually happens when you put fractional support, technical assistance, business matching, capacity building, entrepreneur accountability, provider accountability, and ecosystem coordination in motion at the same time, with real businesses, real providers, and real friction.

Most of what is known about small business support comes from theory or anecdote. This report comes from the field. What we found is not what the sector assumes.

“The future of ecosystem building is not simply connecting people to rooms. It is helping them move once they get there.”

— Naila Jackson · Founder, Network Navigator

WHAT THE RESEARCH ALREADY SAID

Birmingham Was Already on Record as a City That Needed This.

In 2021, the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program published “Birmingham’s Tipping Point: Achieving Inclusive Prosperity in the Post-Pandemic Economy.” The findings were stark. Birmingham ranked in the bottom five among large U.S. cities for job growth in new businesses. The Birmingham region held the lowest rate of Black business ownership of any large metro area in the country.¹

The report’s prescription was direct: connect Black entrepreneurs with the coaching, capital, and resources they need to thrive.

The ecosystem responded. Programs expanded. Directories grew. Workshops filled. Events multiplied. The diagnosis was sound. What the response got wrong was the theory underneath it. More access is not the same as more capacity to use what access provides.

That is the gap Navigator C.O.R.E. was built to test.

¹ Parilla, Joseph, Ryan Donahue, and Sifan Liu. “Birmingham’s Tipping Point: Achieving Inclusive Prosperity in the Post-Pandemic Economy.” Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, June 2021.

THE FINDING THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

The Problem Isn’t Access. It’s Receivership.

The dominant theory in small business support goes like this: entrepreneurs lack access to resources, so the solution is more resources. More workshops. More directories. More one-time consultations. More events.

What Navigator C.O.R.E. found is that access is not the primary barrier. The entrepreneurs in this cohort were motivated, capable, and ready to grow. They had vision and expertise. What they lacked was the operational capacity to receive and integrate sustained support, because they had spent years doing everything alone.

Owners were functioning simultaneously as their own admin, marketer, HR department, bookkeeper, customer service rep, and service provider. That kind of hyper-dependence on self is a survival mechanism. But it becomes a structural barrier the moment outside help arrives.

“Delegation is a skill, not a switch.”

— Cohort Coach · Navigator C.O.R.E.

In the first two months of C.O.R.E., providers were not building deliverables. They were building access. Sending check-ins. Waiting on platform credentials. Offering to pivot. Rebuilding contact after stretches of silence. This was not disengagement on the part of business owners. It was the delegation learning curve: the time it takes for someone who has never had help to learn how to use it.

By month five, the shift had happened. Owners who had once responded inconsistently were arriving to sessions with decisions made, assets ready, and questions prepared. They had moved from doing everything to directing support strategically. That shift is the program’s most underreported outcome. And it took time that most programs are not designed to give.

WHAT THE PILOT ACTUALLY TESTED

Seven Systems. One Ecosystem. Nine Months of Real Data.

Navigator C.O.R.E. was not designed as a simple TA program. It was designed as an ecosystem coordination experiment. Over nine months, the pilot stress-tested seven interdependent systems simultaneously:

Fractional Support	Could part-time, project-based TA deliver sustained impact?
Technical Assistance	What kinds of TA move the needle, and what gets stuck?
Business Matching	Does provider-owner compatibility shape outcomes more than credentials?
Capacity Building	Can you build the capacity to receive support while delivering it?
Entrepreneur Accountability	What does accountability look like without shame or surveillance?
Provider Accountability	How do you support the people doing the supporting?
Ecosystem Coordination	Can a small team manage an interdependent network of relationships?

PILLAR 1 • CAPACITY

The Biggest Challenge Isn't Ambition. It's Bandwidth.

Every entrepreneur in this cohort entered with vision, expertise, and commitment. 100% had agreed to 20-hour-per-week engagement capacity. 100% committed to milestone check-ins. 88% were BIPOC-owned or primarily serving underrepresented communities. Entry readiness was strong.

What the program surfaced was not a motivation gap. It was a bandwidth crisis hidden beneath the surface of every intake form. These owners were not failing to grow because they lacked drive. They were failing to grow because they were already running at 100% capacity, doing jobs that should have been distributed across a team, with no slack left for strategic work.

Most Requested Support Areas

Virtual assistance & admin HR & org systems Workflow & operational support	Branding & marketing Bookkeeping & financial Delegation coaching
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The highest-need categories (admin, branding, and coaching) were not coincidental. They represent the exact functions that solo operators absorb by default and never get to set down. The program did not teach these owners new skills. It gave them the infrastructure to stop carrying everything alone.

PILLAR 2 • OPERATIONS

These Businesses Were Ready for Infrastructure. Not Advice.

Most small business programs are built around the assumption that entrepreneurs need information. C.O.R.E. found something different. The cohort businesses were not early-stage ideas searching for direction. They were active operators, averaging 3 to 8 years in business, running on spreadsheets, notebooks, disconnected platforms, and founder memory.

They did not need more information. They needed someone to sit down with them and build the system. The program delivered accordingly.

Monthly Revenue at Entry

\$558 Business A (lowest)	\$5,500 Business B	\$8,000 Business C (highest)
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Operations Support Delivered

QuickBooks implementation Workflow automation Operational documentation	CRM development Onboarding systems HR assessments
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“A jigsaw puzzle finally put together.”

— Cohort Participant · Navigator C.O.R.E.

Bottom Line

Operational infrastructure is not a luxury for entrepreneurs. It is foundational. The program did not introduce these owners to new concepts. It built the systems they had been trying to build alone.

PILLAR 3 · PROVIDER ACCOUNTABILITY

The People Delivering Support Needed Support Too.

This was the pilot’s most unexpected finding, and one of its most important.

Navigator C.O.R.E. recruited skilled, vetted local experts to deliver technical assistance. They were strong at their craft. What the program revealed is that being a skilled practitioner and being an effective embedded support provider inside a structured nine-month engagement are not the same thing.

Providers arrived with expertise in branding, bookkeeping, operations, technology, and coaching. What some lacked was the infrastructure of providing: clear scope documentation, client communication protocols, deliverable tracking systems, and the relational tools for navigating slow-start engagements without losing momentum.

In at least one instance, a scope misunderstanding required Network Navigator to intervene, clarify deliverables in writing, and reset expectations on both sides before the engagement could continue. This was not a failure. It was a gap the program design had not accounted for, and a signal that wraparound support must flow in both directions.

Three Dimensions of Provider Support Need

Operational: Scope documentation, client communication systems, deliverable tracking

Structural: Clear contracts, billing workflows, conflict resolution protocols

Developmental: Peer learning, cohort convenings, provider capacity building

The good news: the C.O.R.E. model is uniquely positioned to address this. A network of well-supported, well-equipped local TA providers is itself a civic asset. Birmingham has the talent.

The C.O.R.E. model creates the infrastructure around it. A mature version of this program includes a provider track, with the same intentionality applied to onboarding, accountability, and growth that the business owner track receives.

It also produced something the sector rarely sees: provider-to-provider collaboration. One provider, unable to fulfill a portion of scope outside her expertise, subcontracted to a fellow Navigator provider. The revenue stayed in the cohort. The work got done right. That is ecosystem behavior.

PILLAR 4 · EXECUTION

Support Beyond Deliverables.

Technical assistance providers in C.O.R.E. frequently became embedded operational partners, not just deliverable producers. They helped entrepreneurs navigate systems, process decisions, build confidence, and plan for what comes next. The work was relational as often as it was technical.

What this pilot learned is that transformation does not happen in a workshop or a one-time consultation. It happens across a season. There is a sequence to it, and it cannot be rushed.

The Transformation Arc

Months 1–2 Clarify Needs & Build Trust	Months 3–5 Implement Systems & Strengthen Ops	Months 6–9 Build Confidence & Expand Capacity
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“Progress is not defined by immediate financial gain or large milestones, but by the clarity you develop, the consistency you build, and the intentional decisions you make daily.”

— Cohort Coach · Navigator C.O.R.E.

TWO SIDES, ONE ECOSYSTEM

The Program Worked Both Ways.

Navigator C.O.R.E. was built on a simple premise: when business owners get sustained, hands-on support and the local experts delivering it are paid and connected, the entire ecosystem grows stronger. The pilot proved that premise.

12 Business owners served through the pilot	17 Local TA providers engaged and paid	
4 Jobs Created	2 Contracts Landed	1 Provider-to-Provider Subcontract

For entrepreneurs:

Nine months of sustained, relationship-based TA.
Vetted local expertise.
Operational systems built, not just advised.
A roadmap from survival to sustainability.

For providers:

Paid engagements and new revenue streams.
A marketplace to showcase their craft.
Expanded reach into new client networks.
Deeper ties across the Birmingham ecosystem.

“Your business must be designed to fit into your life, not compete with it.”

— Cohort Participant · Navigator C.O.R.E.

WHAT THIS PILOT COST AND WHAT IT PRODUCED**Entrepreneurs Do Not Simply Need Access. They Need Orchestration.**

The highest-need support categories across the cohort (admin, branding, and coaching) cluster around a single concept: orchestration. Not information. Not referrals. Not another workshop. Sustained coordination of the right resources around the right person at the right time.

That kind of orchestration has historically been available only to businesses with the budget to purchase it at market rates. Navigator C.O.R.E. made it accessible.

\$9,416

Total program investment per entrepreneur for 9 months of sustained TA

\$62

Cost per hour of TA paid to vetted local providers; revenue stayed local

The \$9,416 per-entrepreneur figure reflects the full program investment: provider stipends, coordination infrastructure, platform access, and coaching. At \$62 per hour of delivered technical assistance, Navigator C.O.R.E. produced sustained, relationship-based support at a fraction of what comparable private-sector consulting would cost, while keeping every dollar in the local economy.

THE CASE FOR INVESTMENT**What We Know Now That We Didn't Know Before.**

Navigator C.O.R.E. was built on a theory of change. What the first cohort gave us is the data to sharpen it and the confidence to scale it.

On Engagement

Slow engagement is not disengagement. An owner who goes two weeks without responding to a provider is not checked out of their business. They are overwhelmed by it. Programs that measure engagement by response rate are measuring the wrong thing. C.O.R.E. measures it by trajectory.

On Matching

The relationship between owner and provider determines more outcomes than any individual deliverable. When the match worked, everything followed. Future cohorts will invest in intentional matching that accounts for communication style and work cadence, not just technical need.

On Time

Nine months is both long and short. Long enough to build trust and produce real change. Short enough that a two-month ramp-up leaves only seven months of real runway. Cohort 2 front-loads onboarding so every month is used intentionally.

On the Ecosystem

The most durable outcomes of this program are not in any single deliverable. They are in the relationships, the provider network, and the coordination infrastructure that now exist and can be built upon. That infrastructure is the product.

Tier	Investment Level	What Your Investment Supports
Catalyst	\$10,000 to \$24,999	One full participant: 9 months of TA, provider fees, platform access, coordination
Navigator	\$25,000 to \$49,999	Full cohort sponsorship + provider capacity building + platform development
Architect	\$50,000+	Program replication, second-city launch, named partnership across the C.O.R.E. network

THE INVITATION

Movement Is Not the Same as Navigation.

Thousands of small business owners across Birmingham and the Southeast are moving. Posting. Networking. Showing up. Working hard. But movement without navigation leads to exhaustion, not destination.

The help they need already exists in their own communities. Local experts. Peer networks. Civic infrastructure. What has been missing is the coordination layer: the system that matches the right support to the right business at the right time and stays long enough to make sure it lands. Navigator C.O.R.E. built that layer. Tested it. Learned from it. And proved it works.

Cohort 1 was the experiment. Cohort 2 is the investment. The invitation is open to funders, partners, and ecosystem builders who are ready to stop theorizing about what small businesses need and start building the infrastructure that delivers it.

Connect with Network Navigator

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