

Meeting the Moment

Social Innovation Hub Report to Community

March 2025



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY



iINNOVATE
CALGARY



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QUOTES FROM OUR COMMUNITY

About Us

SOCIAL INNOVATION HUB

Our Mission

The Social Innovation Hub helps founders, innovators and researchers launch and scale their solutions to pressing social problems

Our Vision

Alberta is an inclusive innovation ecosystem that develops innovators and innovations that foster inclusive economic development and resilient communities

Our Values

Courage. Curiosity. Authentic Connection. Celebration.



Innovate Calgary

Innovate Calgary envisions a future where Calgary is a global hub for innovation and entrepreneurship. We aspire to be the leading catalyst and support for founders and startups, and a go-to partner for researchers, innovators, businesses, and government in the innovation space.

The Social Innovation Hub is activated by Innovate Calgary and part of a network of innovation hubs operated by Innovate Calgary - such as the Life Sciences Innovation Hub and Aerospace Innovation Hub - which each provide critical wrap around supports to empower innovators, entrepreneurs, and startups to succeed. Through this work, we aim to drive job creation, technological advancements, and sustainable economic development in the region and beyond.

Innovate Calgary draws on nearly 40 years of fostering entrepreneurship and bringing technological discoveries to the world as the innovation headquarters of the University of Calgary.



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY



Our Partners



“Social innovation [is] the intentional implementation of a transdisciplinary initiative to address a social problem enabled through collaborative action leading to new or improved capabilities and relationships with community to generate evidence-informed solutions that are more effective, efficient, just, and sustainable”

-- University of Calgary Definition of Social Innovation

Our close partnership with the University of Calgary is a cornerstone of our success, facilitating founder access to its innovation ecosystem: world-class research, deep talent, as well as a broad palette of innovation resources and expertise. This collaboration enables us to provide depth, breadth, and impact that help set our Hub's founder support apart. We also draw on UCalgary's rigorous research in social innovation to ground our work in thought leadership and evidence in this field, including UCalgary's Social Innovation Initiative and other social innovation champions across campus.

The Social Innovation Hub is made possible through the unique collaboration between the University of Calgary and Innovate Calgary.

Our Partners

Our partners are key members of the Social Innovation Hub community whose support enables joint programming, collaborative research, and efficient and effective ecosystem navigation.

Our core funding partners listed below, as well as the Suncor Energy Foundation and Flanagan Foundation, lay groundwork that drives this work forward. Our shared vision of a more inclusive innovation ecosystem and resilient economy unlocks our ability to help turn bold ideas into meaningful impact.

With the support of:
Prairies Economic
Development Canada



UCeed Social Impact Fund is powered by the generosity of the United Way of Calgary and Area and their mission to mobilize communities for lasting social change and the Government of Alberta's Creative Partnerships bold initiative to support arts and non-profit sectors.



We gratefully acknowledge this work would not be possible without the partnership of 70+ organizations who have generously collaborated with us to deliver events, programming, and bold experiments.

Reflecting on our Journey



"The accelerating pace, interconnectedness, and complexity of such local and global challenges necessitates innovative and holistic thinking to generate long-term social and economic resilience. Putting the 'social' in 'innovation' invites us co-design new approaches and create inclusive partnerships to address challenges that are too big for any individual, company, sector, or even jurisdiction to solve. Our Social Innovation Hub is part of that solution, advancing this approach to long term change."

**- John Wilson, CEO and President,
Innovate Calgary**



"Universities play a critical role in advancing social innovation by bridging research, education, and community impact. At the University of Calgary, initiatives like the Social Innovation Hub create essential spaces where students, researchers, and social entrepreneurs can collaborate to develop solutions to complex societal challenges. By fostering evidence-based, community-driven approaches, we not only support the growth of socially-impactful enterprises and initiatives, but also contribute to building more inclusive, resilient communities. Investing in social innovation means investing in a future where economic development and social well-being go hand in hand."

**- Dr. Katrina Milaney,
Associate Vice-President (Research),
University of Calgary**



"SIH was founded on the idea that the world has the resources, ingenuity, and talent to solve our most complex societal challenges. Our offerings were developed from listening to the 'unusual suspects' in innovation spaces and committing to doing what we can to respond to those needs.

We know the time to act is now, and our aim is to continue to cultivate a community of innovators, changemakers, and agitators who know they are not alone."

- Jordana Armstrong, Director, Social Innovation Hub



"If you are impact curious or impact driven, the SIH is here to support you in delivering on your venture building goals. We know building a venture is hard, but we want to support you along the way with our multitude of resources at UCalgary, industry partners, UCeed investment funds, creative studio, product development, and expert advisors.

Hundreds of founders in Calgary and Alberta are moving the needle on social challenges using innovation and enterprising models. We are proud to be part of their story."

**- Jerome Morgan, Associate Director,
Social Innovation Hub**

Our **Real** Work

It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.

Wendell Berry



-- Hawk mural displayed at SIH entrance, created by TsuuT'ina artist Keegan Starlight, 2023

Report to Community

so·cial in·no·va·tion

noun, verb

an initiative, product or process or program that fundamentally transforms core routines, resource flows, power structures, or prevailing beliefs within a social system

FRANCES WESTLEY

The Social Innovation Hub launched in January 2023 with generous support from the University of Calgary and Prairies Economic Development Canada.

This Inaugural **Report to Community** provides an overview of the Social Innovation Hub's mission to support impact-oriented researchers and founders from diverse backgrounds, our north star goals, and our driving questions. It is also an opportunity to reflect on our learning, celebrate our successes, and identify areas for growth and improvement.

Since its inception, our hub has considered itself a social innovation - ***listening, learning, testing, and iterating*** to deliver on its mission. We welcome your feedback on this learning journey as we strive to keep working to help make more lasting change in our communities. Guided by the work of Frances Westley, we move forward in knowing social innovation is both a journey and a destination.

The Moment

Calgary is in a moment of growth as a city and ecosystem. We are emerging as a **global tech and innovation leader:**

- As of 2024, our startup ecosystem is **valued at \$8 billion**, representing a growth of over 80% over the past 3 yrs (Startup Genome 2024).
- We are on track to add **1,000 new tech companies by 2030** (Calgary Economic Development 2023).
- We're one of **North America's leading tech ecosystems**, ranked 4th in Canada, with the continent's fastest-growing tech talent pool—up over 75% since 2018 (Startup Genome 2024b; CBRE 2024).
- We ranked in the **top 3 cities nationally** for attracting venture capital investment in the first half of 2024, surpassing Vancouver for the first time (Canadian Venture Capital Association 2024).



As our innovation economy scales, we have a unique opportunity.

By building on best practices from ecosystems around the world, we can anticipate challenges they have faced along the way - income inequality, housing affordability, food insecurity, displacement, and community fragmentation (Silicon Valley Index 2024; UC Berkeley News 2019) we can chart a different path.

WHAT KIND OF INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM DO WE WANT TO CREATE?

Calgary's future hinges on the choices we make today. By choosing an ecosystem that values both innovation and inclusion, we can ensure Calgary's growth leaves no one behind, building a city and economy that endures as a place of opportunity for all.

Meeting the Moment

The Social Innovation Hub supports underrepresented founders to launch and scale their innovative solutions. They are often first-time founders, diverse founders - solving different problems, pursuing different solutions, and bringing in different backgrounds and perspectives. Charting new paths, they can experience the ecosystem as unusual suspects. They include:

- **Impact founders**
- **Researcher innovators**
- **Enterprising non-profits**

Calgary's blue sky approach to innovation is attracting diverse founders and entrepreneurs. However, many struggle to find success because they may not fit the typical definition of who is an innovator, what an innovation looks like, or how it scales.



Though our work we've:

- **supported 250+ founders** tackling social problems and working to create benefits that uplift their communities
- provided **comprehensive wrap-around supports**, using tools from both venture-building and social innovation, as well as the powerful innovation infrastructure of the University of Calgary
- started to **create new models** to unlock the potential of underserved founders and help their solutions launch and scale

In this report, we're excited to showcase game-changing innovators who are leveraging the innovation ecosystem to tackle social challenges and drive lasting impact. By supporting unusual suspects in launching and scaling solutions, we're helping foster the conditions for more jobs, opportunity, and stronger communities in Calgary and Alberta.



The Gaps What We've Heard

We've listened, learned, and supported the journeys of hundreds of unusual suspects trying to move their solutions forward in our innovation ecosystem. We heard there are clear challenges founders are facing and gaps and barriers in existing supports, including:



LIMITED TRAINING

- limited training in how to develop and validate business models working towards both social and economic returns



CONFIDENCE

- lack of confidence in risk taking and prototyping



STORYTELLING

- little training and support in how to tell the story of their business and impact and share it across different mediums and audiences



INCLUSION

- language and accent barriers
- feeling pushed to the edges of the ecosystem, not given space at the center
- lack of networks and sense of belonging and trust within the innovation ecosystem



FUNDING

- limited access to funding that supports and values diverse innovators and innovations



MENTAL HEALTH

- time constraints and burnout



IP STRATEGY

- not enough nuanced guidance on how best to leverage IP to amplify their venture and sustain their impact

Closing the Gaps

Entrepreneurs and innovators with impactful solutions to challenges in our communities are growing in numbers in Calgary and across this province. But as these gaps highlight - too many promising solutions led by unusual suspects are being left on the table because of a lack of confidence, capacity, and connections. We're filling these gaps with a unique blend of responsive supports.



Our approach to delivering these supports is unique, centering founders and relationships with an inclusive lens. This is reflected in whom we serve, how we deliver support, and our collaborative, community-focused engagement.

Supporting unusual suspects in our ecosystem, who are often first-time founders, requires a relational approach that builds confidence, trust, and understanding. This approach is essential to inviting in more diverse founders and ideas and creating an inclusive ecosystem that drives innovation across our city, province, and beyond.

Over the following pages, we describe our supports and their impact in more detail, as well as broader ripple effects in the ecosystem.

At the Social Innovation Hub, we draw on social innovation and entrepreneurial tools to build long-term resilience for founders and their ventures.

Who Do We Serve?

A man in a dark suit and glasses is seen from the side, pointing his right hand towards a group of people seated at tables in a meeting room. The room has blue walls with various posters and a fire alarm pull station. The people are diverse in age and ethnicity, and some are looking towards the man. The room is well-lit with overhead lights.

Impact Founders
solving problems in their communities

Enterprising non-profit leaders
growing the reach of their
service/product and building resilience

Researcher innovators
looking to scale their evidence-based
solutions to reduce their reliance
on grants to sustain their work

Our Community

Our member community of entrepreneurs and innovators, coming from diverse backgrounds and paths, are driving the change we need.

MEET SOME OF OUR MEMBERS



Our Community is SOLVING WICKED PROBLEMS



UN Sustainable Development Goals <https://sdgs.un.org/>

Our community of founders takes on today's toughest social challenges—wicked problems—by developing bold solutions that tackle the root causes.

SEX & GENDER EQUITY

Centre for Sexuality trains and advocates to support healthy bodies, healthy relationships and healthy communities.

My Normative facilitates equitable data collection and management to help differences emerge across sex and gender to ensure better health outcomes.

EQUITABLE HOUSING

Sparks Planning Group ensures that every voice is heard throughout the planning process, prioritizing the needs of underrepresented groups in policies, programs, and development projects.

NEWCOMER ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

UCAN Radio is helping the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians that have come to Canada since the beginning of the war. Almost one and a half million have lived here for many generations. By uniting newcomers with Ukrainian Canadians, we are building a bridge to strengthen culture and language.





ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Headwater Learning Foundation builds solutions that are systemic, scalable, and sustainable to improve underserved learner outcomes across the country and around the world.



OVERDOSE DETECTION

Brave exists for one reason—to help stop the overdose crisis. This is why Brave makes tools that detect overdoses and activate life-saving community response, whenever and wherever people use drugs.



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Shift to Learn is dedicated to enhancing the capacities of leaders and practitioners in advancing primary prevention efforts to stop the perpetration of violence.



RELIABLE SOLAR ENERGY

Leading Canada's green energy efforts as one of the first 100% renewable energy utility providers, offering Canadians access to the wholesale energy market while providing clean energy at an affordable rate.





SOCIAL INNOVATION HUB CORE OFFERINGS

Core Venture Building Supports

We know that venture building supports can help founders and researchers create a sustainable foundation to launch and grow their solution. However, a transactional, one-size-fits-all approach often falls short, especially for those who might not fit the traditional mold.

We develop deep relationships with founders to truly understand their journey, their vision, where they're feeling stuck, and the most relevant supports to help them move forward. Through our membership model, our founders are matched with a venture navigator who becomes their consistent point of contact through their entrepreneurial journey and connects them with our key venture-building supports, such as:



dedicated 1:1 coaching to help founders move through barriers and find the most relevant resources



expert advice from industry and technical leaders who understand the challenges and needs of unusual suspects and help fill knowledge gaps



access to space to host events, demos or meetings with clients and network with other social innovators

Prototyping Supports to Catalyze More **Inclusive Innovation**

To meet the needs of unusual suspects and broaden participation in the innovation ecosystem, we have also prototyped an expanded set of supports that respond to their distinct challenges, such as:



Responsive Programming

Our tailored programs such as our Research to Social Innovation Incubator, Business Model Enhancement Program, and BIPOC and Rural Pitch Series, address diverse founders' unique needs, helping them build their capacity and grow their ventures sustainably.



Mental Health Supports

We were the first tech incubator in Alberta to offer mental health support and counselling, helping founders build resilience to navigate entrepreneurial stressors, especially those facing additional barriers.



Creative Studio

A first of its kind storytelling and design-thinking resource in Calgary's ecosystem, the Creative Studio equips founders with the skills to build lasting connections with customers, investors, and communities, as well as 1-1 product support to prototype and pivot their solution forward.



Impact Financing Support

We help our members get investor-ready by building their skills, strengthening their ventures, and identifying relevant impact funders, angel investors, and funds like UCeed Social Impact Fund.

Together, we are creating a **leading hub** for **social innovation** in Western Canada.

Our Initiatives

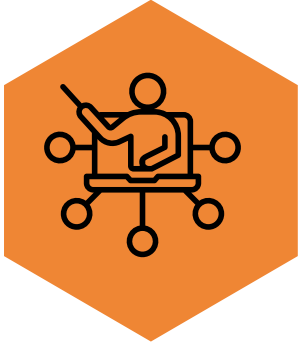
How are we getting there?

BARRIERS

BARRIER:
Founders have limited skills, tools, connections, and confidence in engaging with stakeholders and customers meaningfully.

BARRIER:
Non-profits and social-profit leaders struggle to produce impact in financially sustainable ways.

INITIATIVES



BIPOC & Rural Pitch Series

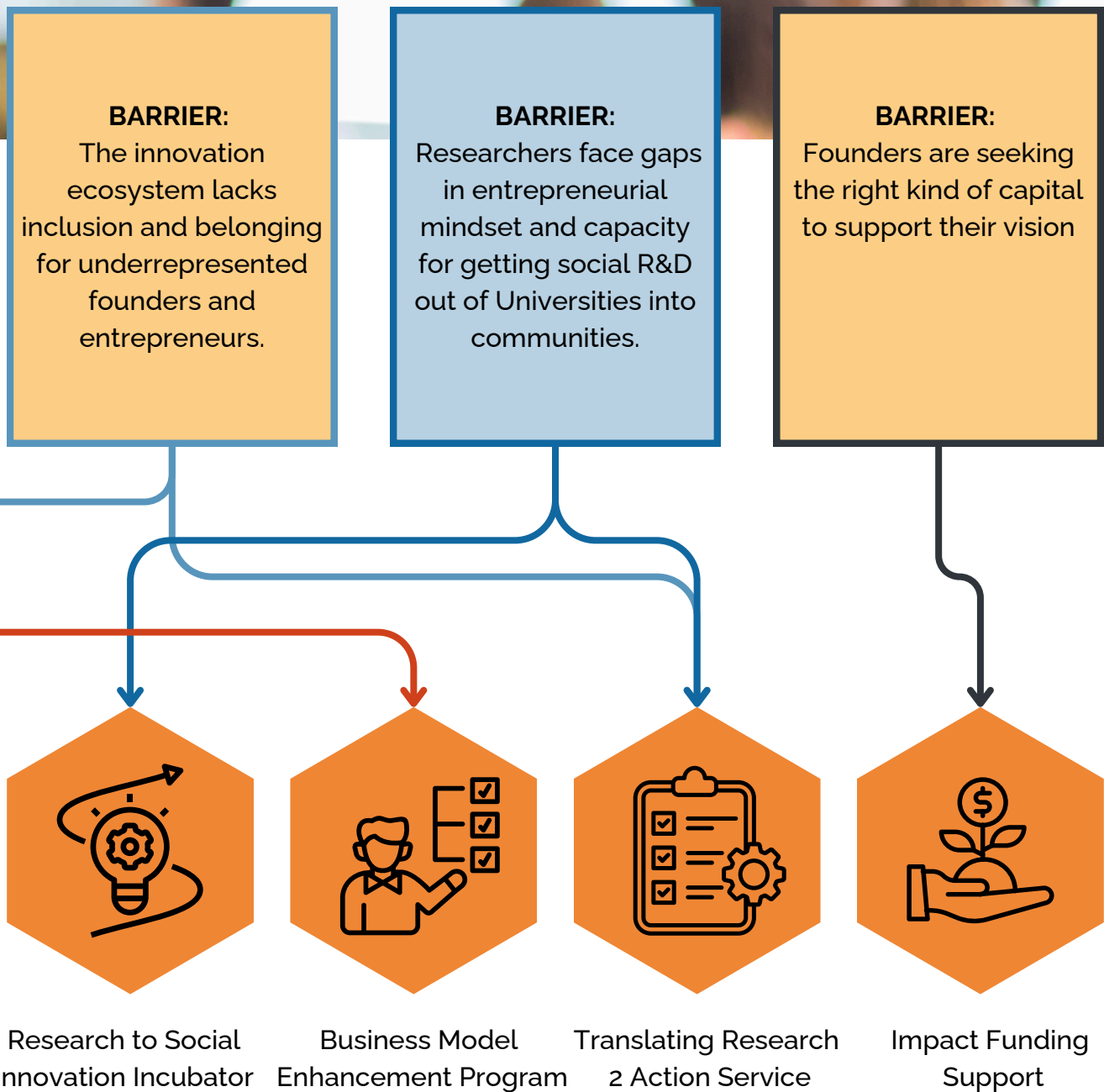


Creative Studio



SIH Membership

Initiatives and activities that address the barriers making it difficult for unusual suspects - Impact Founders, Researcher innovators and Enterprising non-profits - to move their solutions forward in the innovation ecosystem



Responsive Programming



Our offerings are tailored to support unusual suspects as they navigate new entrepreneurial and innovation paths, often for the first time. We bridge gaps in language, skills, and resources, connecting founders with a community

that understands their unique challenges. Moving away from a one-size-fits-all model, we provide relevant supports when they're needed to help founders move to their next milestone.

PROGRAMS

Research to Social Innovation Incubator (R2SI)	6-month incubator that supports impact-oriented founders validate their business model, and impact to grow their evidence-based solution
Business Model Enhancement Program (BMEP)	6 months of 1-1 coaching, funding, and expert advising focused on supporting non-profit organizations to develop sustainable social enterprises
BIPOC & Rural Pitch Series	A pitch series supporting underrepresented entrepreneurs by facilitating access to venture investment, expert advice, business coaching, strategic referrals, network building, and access into the larger Alberta tech ecosystem
Meaningful Connections Program	Pilot program that connected diverse founders and advisors in an environment that honoured their identities and took a whole-person approach to venture support
Workshops and Events	Inclusive gatherings that bring together diverse founders to explore their entrepreneurial journey, identify common challenges, share supports and ways forward, and build community in a safe and supportive environment



With a community of over 70 partners and growing, we are working together to broaden **who** is seen as an innovator, **what** is seen as innovation, and **how** it scales.

Pitch Competition Winner Profile: UpRow



**Kelise Williams,
Founder**

UpRow is a cutting-edge recommendation tool designed to help immigrants avoid decision fatigue and make quick, informed decisions as they navigate life in a new country. By connecting users with verified immigration professionals and key settlement services, UpRow aims to simplify the transition process and empower newcomers to thrive.

Founder, Kelise Williams, was inspired to create UpRow based on her experience of being unprepared for life in Canada when she first arrived, which left her without a home on her first night. Through UpRow, Kelise is committed to ensuring that others have the tools and resources needed to settle quickly and confidently.

UpRow has received funding from the City of Edmonton via the Edmonton Edge Fund and is raising a pre-seed round to accelerate growth and expand its offerings. Uprow has also expanded its reach, providing nationwide support to newcomers.

Kelise first connected with the SIH by applying to our BIPOC Women in Tech Pitch Competition, where she won both the top pitch prize and the People's Choice Award. This milestone provided critical support for fundraising, networking, and collaboration, fueling UpRow's growth. Since then, Kelise has been named one of the Top 5 Startups at the Startup TNT Investment Summit and was a finalist in two additional pitch competitions. The Hub's support for impact innovators like Kelise is helping build a more inclusive ecosystem, enabling Canadians to leverage the innovation infrastructure to solve challenges in their communities.



R2SI Fellow Profile: Shift to Learn



Elina Esina,
Co-Founder and
Director of Operations

Shift to Learn is an innovative online learning platform dedicated to building a skilled workforce for violence prevention. Through self-paced and interactive online modules, the platform focuses on key topics such as violence prevention skills, influencing social policy, and changing community conditions to stop violence. By bridging research with actionable strategies, the platform creates tangible social impact.



Lana Wells,
Co-Founder and
Research Chair

Shift to Learn was co-founded by Lana Wells, Research Chair and founder of Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence, and Elena Esina, its Director of Operations, both based at the University of Calgary's Faculty of Social Work.

As fellows in the R2SI Incubator, they received tailored support to transition from research to a sustainable enterprise—refining their business model, building digital assets, and solidifying their impact framework.

Since graduating in 2022, Shift to Learn has grown to 500+ active users, expanded across provinces, formed a variety of partnerships, and received funding from diverse funders, governments, and organizations. The SIH's unique focus on helping researchers step onto the entrepreneurial path has equipped this team to scale their evidence-based training, shape training policies in major organizations, and shift the focus in domestic violence from intervention to prevention, achieving transformative social innovation.



BMEP Fellow Profile: Children First Canada

Children First Canada, a national charity dedicated to defending the rights of children, is navigating a new path to sustainability by diversifying its revenue and exploring social enterprise opportunities.

The organization developed “Being, Belonging, Becoming” an innovative virtual youth leadership program that improves youth mental health and resilience and buffers them from adversity. Supported by a cutting-edge curriculum and digital platform for learning and engagement, underserved youth ages 13-18 develop the skills, capacity, and confidence to address complex social issues like bullying, racism, and climate change.

To expand its reach and resilience, Children First Canada joined the Hub’s Business Model Enhancement Program. Through advisory support and seed funding, Children First Canada refined its marketing strategy and business model. They are now exploring ways to scale up with the launch of “the Leaders Lab”: a comprehensive virtual platform to host programs like Being, Belonging, Becoming, expand its reach and develop a more sustainable revenue stream.



Founder Profile: Collectively Tangled



**Keara Gillis,
Co-Founder**



**Sarah Mateshaytis,
Co-Founder**

Collectively Tangled provides therapy for entrepreneurs. In 2023, they joined the SIH as fellows in its Research to Social Innovation Incubator to refine their business model, target customers, and sales approach.

Since then, they expanded their team and launched a Membership offering to make mental health support accessible and a business priority for entrepreneurs. They are becoming a vital resource for the entrepreneurial ecosystem to integrate mental health into innovation.

In partnership with the SIH, Collectively Tangled piloted offering therapy and workshops to the Innovate Calgary community in 2024, through which:

- 36 therapy hours were attended by 22 people
- 66 people attended mental health workshops on such topics as Managing Expectations and Preventing Burnout
- Staff engaged in 12 hours of consultation to enhance their knowledge and gain tools to support the mental health of entrepreneurs.



Get the Change Can't
Wait Playbook





Founder Mental Health Supports

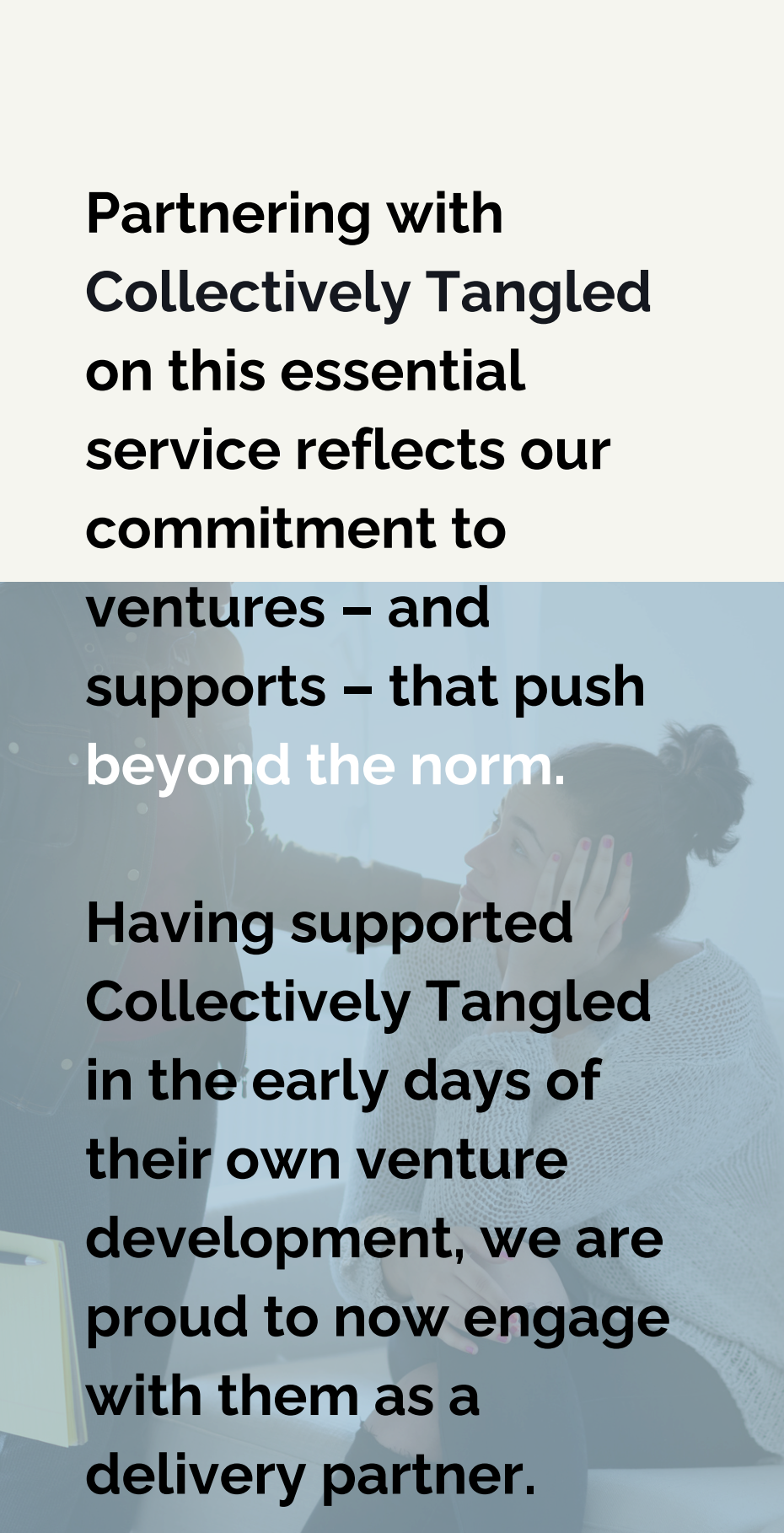


Entrepreneurs experience mental health concerns at a higher rate than the general population.

To address this reality, we've partnered with Collectively Tangled, to provide mental health supports tailored for entrepreneurs.

Collectively Tangled's unique mental health supports help founders recognize their strengths and weaknesses - and where they need to bring in additional support. They also help founders build tools to cope with the acute stressors of an entrepreneurial path, e.g. stress and burnout, co-founder alignment, and financial stress.

By investing in founder resilience, we're investing in venture resilience. With mental health supports, innovators can better sustain their work, and grow their impact in our communities over the long term. By piloting ways to make these supports more accessible, we are working to ensure mental health is not just recognized - but prioritized in the founder journey.



Partnering with
Collectively Tangled
on this essential
service reflects our
commitment to
ventures – and
supports – that push
beyond the norm.

Having supported
Collectively Tangled
in the early days of
their own venture
development, we are
proud to now engage
with them as a
delivery partner.

54%

OF ENTREPRENEURS
reported that their mental
health interfered with their
work

80%

OF SENIOR LEADERSHIP
report exhaustion typical
with burnout risk

66%

OF FOUNDERS
have difficulty maintaining a
work life balance

COLLECTIVELY TANGLED 2025

The Creative Studio

The Creative Studio is a one-of-a-kind resource that empowers founders by strengthening their confidence, capacity, and risk-taking abilities in storytelling and design.

Through personalized support and tailored skills-building in areas like storytelling, design thinking and product development, the Creative Studio equips founders with the tools they need. With this support, our members can more confidently engage in validation, rapid prototyping, and iterative learning.

Leveraging the expertise and resources in the Studio, founders learn to craft compelling narratives to connect meaningfully with key audiences, iterate on their offerings, and refine their brand identity, enabling them to navigate challenges with resilience and drive sustainable growth.

By strengthening these abilities, the Creative Studio empowers founders to adapt, pivot, and advance their ventures with confidence, using a distinct lens and approach that sets this support apart.



STORYTELLING SUPPORT

help founders tell the right story for their key audiences

DESIGN THINKING AND PRODUCT SUPPORT

help founders solve problems and test ideas as they launch their novel solutions

AUDIO-VISUAL PRODUCTION SUPPORT

help create compelling content with the right tools and skills



SIH Member Profile: UCAN RADIO & the Creative Studio



Dmytro Gospodinov
UCAN Radio Founder, Producer

Impact Founder



Dmytro Gospodinov has a vision that community radio is not just about music and entertainment; it's about building bridges and fostering a sense of belonging in a new land. Through storytelling workshops, high-quality tools and resources, as well as strategic guidance from the Creative Studio, the Hub empowered Dmytro to navigate the complexities of entrepreneurship and community engagement with confidence and resilience. As an Ukrainian immigrant, Dmytro understands the challenges of adaptation and integration in a new country. His vital platform, UCAN Radio provides a way to connect Ukrainian-Canadian communities and support efforts back home. "Half of the ad revenue goes directly to support Ukraine... simply by tuning in to UCAN Radio or sharing the link, you're contributing to Ukraine financially."

Dmytro attracts and keeps audiences engaged through a development pipeline of high-quality content produced through the SIH's Creative Studio. Since completing CCIS's business and mentorship program, he has created several podcasts, a children's story time show and content for newcomer communities from the many events he's run at the Hub as a member. More broadly, for Dmytro the SIH isn't just a workspace; it's a home for innovation and collaboration. he noted. The support and empathy from the Hub staff resonated deeply with Dmytro, reinforcing his sense of belonging and purpose in his new home.

"It has been a perfect place to run the radio station and to enhance the Ukrainian community here"



Impact Financing

that supports the unique journeys of unusual suspects



The UCeed Social Impact Fund, managed by Innovate Calgary, invests specifically in ventures balancing both purpose and profit with innovative and tested solutions to social problems.

The UCeed Social Impact Fund is an early-stage investment fund, backed by philanthropic support, seeking to accelerate early-stage social ventures. Since its launch date in March 2021, USIF has made **20 investments and invested over \$2.7M** in ventures making positive change in our communities. It received foundational funding from the United Way of Calgary and Area and the Government of Alberta.

The Social Innovation Hub supports social ventures in getting investment ready for social finance funds, such as the UCeed Social Impact, with coaching, targeted workshops and training, and key ecosystem referrals.

By helping unusual suspects access the right kind of capital that values their worth and potential, the Social Innovation Hub is helping social innovators and innovations launch and scale over the long-term.



**UCeed Startup
Investment Funds**

UCeed Portfolio Company Profile: Brave COOP



**Gordon Casey,
Founder and CEO**

Impact Founder

Brave makes tools that detect overdoses and activate life-saving community response, whenever and wherever people use drugs.

Their one goal: to help stop the overdose crisis.

Operating as a cooperative, Brave's collective ownership model has made accessing traditional investments a challenge. On track to its first \$1 million sales year, the venture had faced significant challenges in raising capital and received multiple rejections from potential investors.

In order to scale their solution and save more lives, the team from the UCeed Social Impact Fund worked closely with Brave to develop a hybrid investment model that combined a revenue-based loan with cooperative shares, creating a blended return profile that aligned with the needs of both Brave and the fund.

As an investee of the UCeed Social Impact Fund, Brave has adjusted its approach to fundraising, now focusing on family offices, angel investors, and cooperatively-owned funds rather than traditional venture capital. Through continued support from UCeed, Brave is exploring new markets, including hospitals and governments, to scale its impact.



HIGHLIGHTS OF OUR JOURNEY

2021-2022

Research and Founder Listening Sessions
Digital Compass Launch

April 2022

R2SI Cohort 1 Launch

June 2022

SIH Funding Announcement

January 2023

SIH Space Opens

February 2023

R2SI Cohort 2 Launch

March 2023

Launch of Meaningful Connections Program

April 2023

BIPOC Women in Tech Pitch Event

May 2023

Creatives & Tech Connect

October 2023

Rural Founder in Tech Pitch Event

October 2023

R2SI Cohort 3 Launch

October 2023

Social Enterprise World Forum

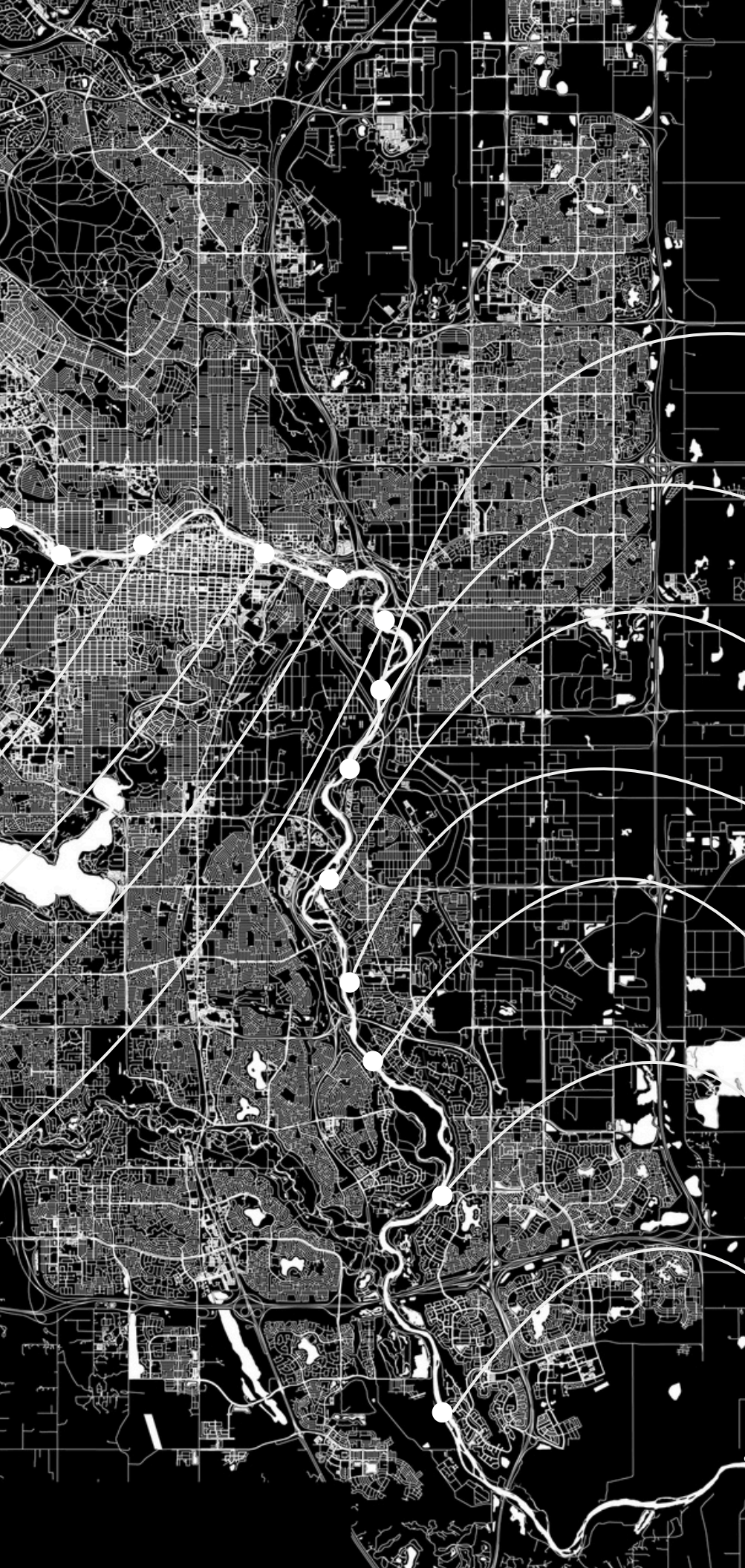
November 2023

Newcomers in Tech Pitch Event

December 2023

BMEP Program Launch





February 2024

**Creative Studio launches
Storytelling Series**

April 2024

**Founder Mental Health &
Counselling Pilot Launched**

June 2024

Social Finance Forum

October 2024

**Launch of Social Innovation
Ignite Prize Awards**

September 2024

**Introduction of Artist
in Residence Service**

December 2024

**Impact Measurement
Bootcamp**

November 2024

**Introduction of product
advising in Creative Studio**

SOCIAL INNOVATION HUB BY THE NUMBERS



100+

BIPOC FOUNDERS SUPPORTED

250+

FOUNDERS SUPPORTED

\$250K+

IN PRIZE MONEY AND AWARDS



10+

RURAL FOUNDERS ASSISTED



400+

SOCIAL INNOVATORS CONNECTING AT SIH EVENTS

40+

NPOS LOOKING TO DIVERSIFY REVENUE SUPPORTED



70+

PARTNERS ENGAGED



TRANSLATING UNIVERSITY INNOVATION INTO IMPACT

40+

RESEARCHER INNOVATORS SUPPORTED IN TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO IMPACT

\$2.7M+

INVESTED IN SOCIAL START UPS THROUGH UCEED SOCIAL IMPACT FUND



5

FACULTY ALUMNI ADVANCING SOCIAL VENTURES SUPPORTED

\$1M+

RAISED TO UNLOCK UNIVERSITY ASSETS FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION



25+

STUDENT PLACEMENTS WITH VENTURES

9 OF 13

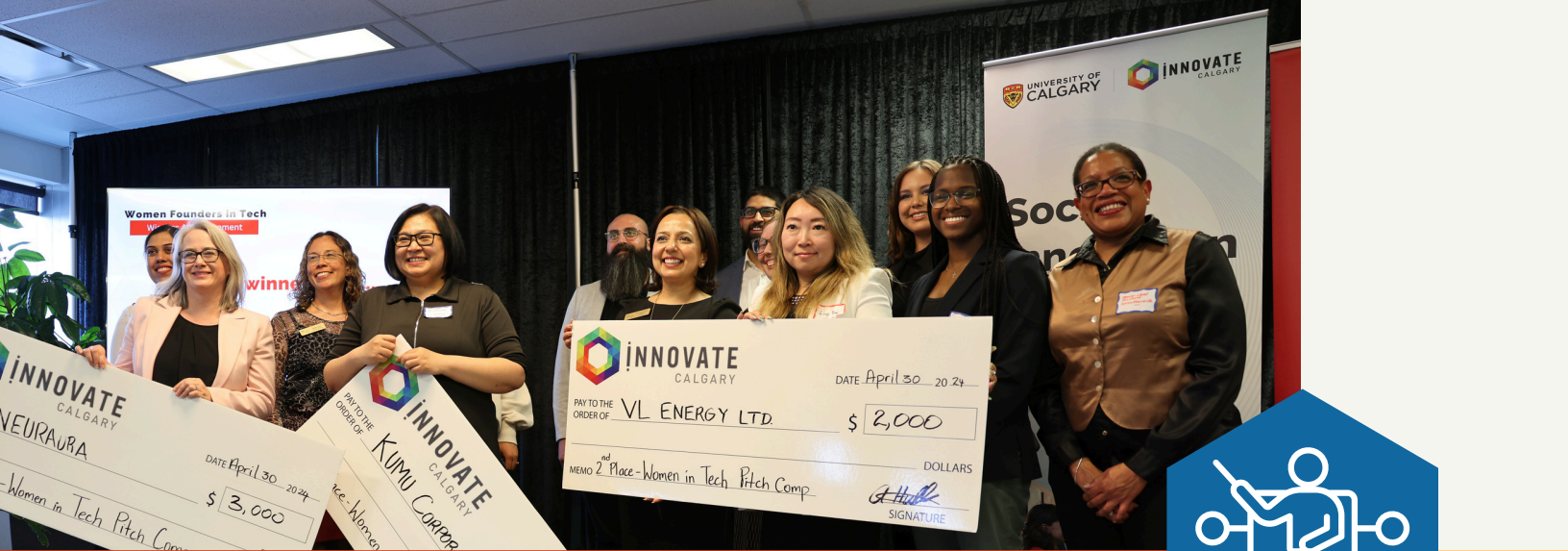
UCALGARY FACULTIES SUPPORTED- ENGAGING INNOVATORS FROM ACROSS CAMPUS



280+

STUDENTS ENGAGED





Ripples of Change:

Building a More Inclusive Innovation Ecosystem

In order for the founders we support to thrive, we know we have to be mindful of the broader context in which they are moving their solution forward. Diverse innovators cannot just be celebrated at the Social Innovation Hub - their value must be recognized within the broader ecosystem so they can succeed long-term.

This approach connects to a driving principle of our work - to make the entrepreneurial and innovation space in Calgary, and Alberta, more inclusive. This is reflected in our direct founder support, our relational approach, as well as key initiatives focused on supporting BIPOC and rural founders to thrive.

We know we cannot do this work alone. We have developed strong partnerships with government, universities and colleges, private foundations, organizations supporting BIPOC communities, and an array of ecosystem actors. With a community of over 70 partners and growing, we are working together to broaden who is seen as an innovator, what is seen as innovation, and how it scales.

Ultimately, we recognize that supporting founders means addressing both their individual needs, as well as the systemic barriers they face. Together with our partners, we're moving from talking about an inclusive and resilient ecosystem, to building one.

BIPOC & Rural Pitch Series



8

PITCH EVENTS HOSTED
CENTERING BIPOC
& RURAL FOUNDERS



\$75K

AWARDED IN FUNDING TO
BIPOC & RURAL FOUNDERS



50

BIPOC FOUNDERS
SUPPORTED WITH
VENTURE SERVICES



25

BIPOC VENDORS ENGAGED
THROUGH PROCUREMENT



Spotlight on Rural Founders

The Rural Founders in Tech Pitch Competition aims to increase access and participation in the innovation sector by helping accelerate ventures by entrepreneurs in rural Alberta.

Over the last two years, the Social Innovation Hub has hosted two rural pitch events with partners in Calgary, Red Deer and Lethbridge. Our latest **pitch event** in October brought five talented founders together in Red Deer to pitch their startups. It also featured a resource fair and networking opportunities with ecosystem actors from Calgary coming to engage entrepreneurs and founders in Red Deer. By hosting this event locally, we support rural entrepreneurs in connecting, growing, and driving innovation within their own communities and showcase the incredible innovation in rural Alberta.

With continued wrap-around supports from the SIH, we are excited to see these startups grow and continue to drive innovation in rural communities.





Indigenous Innovator Showcase

The Indigenous Innovators in Tech Showcase, part of the BIPOC and Rural Tech Founders event series, aims to increase access and participation in the innovation sector by supporting Indigenous entrepreneurs.

This showcase brought together an impactful group of Indigenous innovators to share their stories and impact, each receiving non-dilutive capital and participating in two coaching sessions to refine their pitches. A total of \$15,000 in funding was provided across the founders.

The event also fostered networking and discussions on challenges Indigenous founders face. In the planning of this showcase, the Hub worked with Indigenous community members and partners to build relationships, better understand the journey of Indigenous founders in tech, and collaboratively bring to life an event with respect for Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

By creating a platform for Indigenous founders, this event highlighted Indigenous-led innovation, connected these community leaders with key resources to help move their ventures and impact forward, and walked further down a path of building a more inclusive tech and innovation ecosystem in Alberta.



Quotes from our Community



“Joining Innovate Calgary's Social Innovation Hub in October 2024 has been incredibly rewarding, providing essential resources like AWS credits, IP protection, and networking opportunities that helped transform my startup into a revenue-generating business. The supportive community and impactful connections, including meeting my co-founder for Conversity Inc., make it a must for tech founders working on socially impactful projects.”

Neji Tawo, Founder/CEO SageMaster AI

“The SIH is truly one of my favourite places to work. Its welcoming atmosphere fosters creativity, collaboration, and a sense of belonging. It's amazing to be part of a space where innovation meets community, and where every project is driven by the desire to make a positive impact. I love my position because it has given me the opportunity to spread my wings, challenge myself, and grow both personally and professionally.”

Neha Kawa, Student Social Innovation Analyst

"The mentorship and resources I received through R2SI was invaluable—not just for growing Maskwa, but for navigating the broader challenges of entrepreneurship and social impact. R2SI recognizes that a founder's journey is just as important as the venture's success and values the entrepreneur behind the business, which makes all the difference."

Erin Creegan-Dougherty, student and founder,
Maskwa Backcountry Foods

"The Social Innovation Hub has been instrumental in shaping UCAN Radio's entrepreneurial journey, offering not just resources but a vibrant community of forward-thinkers and changemakers. The support and connections we've built through the Hub have directly contributed to our growth, helping us turn ideas into action."

Dmytro Gospodinov, UCAN Radio Founder, Producer

"Our innovative training program for community organizations called Building Knowledge Together would never have come about without the amazing folks on the R2SI team who guided us and encouraged us every step of the way! As our work continues to develop we feel supported and informed knowing the team is as invested in our success as we are."

Dr. Meaghan Edwards



What's Next?

Looking ahead, we'll keep providing tailored supports for unusual suspects in our innovation ecosystem that foster both founder and venture resilience over the long term. Not only are these supports broadening access and participation in our innovation ecosystem, we are also advancing the thinking of what supports are needed for entrepreneurs to thrive, and how to deliver them.

In addition to these founder supports, we will continue to collaborate with key partners to further reduce barriers for underserved entrepreneurs, researchers and

innovators and work toward building a more inclusive and resilient innovation ecosystem in Calgary.

We're excited about the recent launch of new supports developed in response to our continued learning of ecosystem gaps. These include the inaugural Social Innovation Ignite initiative, launched in Fall 2024, to help campus and community innovators better leverage University of Calgary assets for community impact.

While universities play a key role in innovation ecosystems, their infrastructure has often been leveraged for STEM-based solutions. We hope to expand that support to help launch and scale community-driven social innovation.





We also launched a pilot Artist in Residence program to spark creative exchanges between artists and entrepreneurs, inspiring fresh ideas, new directions, and greater creative confidence. This offering reflects our commitment to advancing new forms of entrepreneurial support, pushing beyond traditional models to foster new ways of thinking, as well as broaden the ways founders drive impact and reach new audiences.

We will continue deepening connections, building relationships, and expanding our learning from our Indigenous partners - on and off campus - to ensure our supports respect and are responsive to diverse ways of knowing, being, and doing. As part of that journey, we are deeply grateful to learn from our first Indigenous Advisor in Residence, whose teachings and perspectives guide us in creating a more inclusive home for innovators and changemakers.

Lastly, Innovate Calgary has recently launched a new Aerospace Innovation Hub. We are excited to foster cross-disciplinary and creative collaborations with innovators in this sector.

We look forward to continuing to learn, iterate, and work together to help innovators, researchers and entrepreneurs move toward sustainable impact and create lasting change in our communities.

Thank you,
The Social Innovation Hub Team

Join the Community

www.innovatecalgary.com/social-innovation/



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