



# **Economic Recovery Implementation Hub**

## **Grant Efficiency Study**

Eastern Maine Development Corporation

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## I. Executive Summary

Eastern Maine Development Corporation (EMDC), in partnership with the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD), launched the Economic Recovery Implementation HUB program in 2023 to provide targeted small business support for enterprises established after January 1, 2020. Funded through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan (MJRP), the program was designed to leverage public investment to stimulate local economic recovery in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As of May 1, 2025, EMDC has awarded nearly \$1.4 million in direct grants to 56 businesses across Penobscot, Piscataquis, Washington, Waldo, and Hancock counties. In addition, more than 175 businesses have benefited from technical assistance and entrepreneurial training delivered in collaboration with 12 regional partners. The program prioritized equitable access to capital, focusing on early-stage businesses and those in underserved rural communities.

To evaluate the program's effectiveness, EMDC conducted a Grant Efficiency Study in spring and summer 2025. This evaluation included in-depth interviews with 15 grant recipients as well as survey results from 14 recipients whose projects have been completed to assess how the funding was used and what it enabled.

### Key Findings:

- Businesses used grant funding to upgrade equipment, expand operations, and improve infrastructure. Several grantees leveraged this support to secure additional investments or enter new markets.
- Grants helped stabilize employment. Several businesses used the funds to retain staff or improve workplace readiness for future hiring.
- The funding helped businesses increase service capacity, improve accessibility, and drive foot traffic to rural downtowns. Many recipients contributed to cultural programming, family services, and tourism, amplifying their role in the local economy.
- Grants served as a financial bridge during periods of uncertainty, allowing small businesses to weather delays in reimbursements or recover from infrastructure disruptions. Many now report stronger financial outlooks and improved resilience.
- Grantees described the process as user-friendly and responsive. The overwhelming response was that the program met the needs of early-stage businesses with clarity and purpose.

The grant recipients demonstrated how small, strategic grants can catalyze growth, enhance visibility, and create ripple effects across the regional economy.

The Grant Efficiency Study confirms that investing in small business support, when paired with strong regional partnerships and responsive program design, can leverage



public dollars into lasting community impact, stimulating recovery, resilience, and opportunity throughout rural Maine.

## **I. Introduction**

In 2023, Eastern Maine Development Corporation (EMDC) was awarded a contract by the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) to lead the Economic Recovery Implementation HUB program in Penobscot and Eastern Maine, funded through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan (MJRP). This program was created to support businesses established after January 1, 2020, in response to the unprecedented economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The initiative provided targeted grants, technical assistance, and entrepreneurial training through a network of 12 partner organizations. Its primary goal was to equip emerging businesses with the tools and resources necessary for long-term success in a rapidly evolving economic landscape.

From July 2023 through May 2025, EMDC awarded grants to 56 businesses across Penobscot, Piscataquis, Washington, Waldo, and Hancock counties. Awards ranged from \$14,000 to \$50,000, totaling over \$1.4 million in direct financial support. In addition to these grants, more than 175 businesses received technical assistance through EMDC and its regional partners, including Four Directions Development Corporation (FDDC), UpStart Maine, Maine MultiCultural Center (MMCC), Northern Maine Development Commission (NMDC), and the Cooperative Development Institute (CDI).

To understand the broader effects of this investment, EMDC conducted a Grant Efficiency Study during the spring and summer of 2025. The study assesses how these small but strategic grants impacted local economies, workforce development, tourism, and community stability. Fifteen of the 56 grantees were interviewed one-on-one, sharing first-hand accounts of how the funding shaped their operations and community presence. This report summarizes those findings and provides insight into the tangible value of direct investment in early-stage businesses as a tool for economic recovery and resilience in rural Maine.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the impact of grant funding provided through the Economic Recovery Implementation HUB program on individual businesses and the broader communities they serve. Conducted by Eastern Maine Development Corporation (EMDC) in 2025, the study is intended to document outcomes, identify trends, and inform future economic recovery strategies. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Evaluate how the grants supported business growth and sustainability by assessing changes in operations, revenue, staffing, and service offerings among grantees.



- Measure the economic and social impact of the grants on the community, including job creation, increased access to goods and services, strengthened local supply chains, and contributions to tourism.
- Explore the long-term effects of the grants on business financial health, operational capacity, and resilience, as well as their role in stabilizing and revitalizing the local economy in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These objectives reflect the program's broader goal of fostering inclusive, regional economic recovery by investing in Maine's newest and most vulnerable businesses.

## **II. Methodology**

The study's methodology included qualitative and quantitative data collection to assess the impact of the grants. EMDC conducted one-on-one interviews with 15 grant recipients and reviewed survey responses, operational, and financial information to understand how funds were used. Community-level data on local economic indicators were also considered. Evaluation metrics included changes in revenue, staffing, customer reach, and operational capacity, as well as broader contributions to local economies through job creation, increased foot traffic, and service expansion.

## **III. Impact on Small Businesses**

Grant funding supported a wide range of business growth and development activities. Businesses reported expanding their services, reaching new customer bases, and investing in marketing, infrastructure, and digital tools. Many noted the grants enabled them to stabilize operations and take strategic steps toward long-term growth. Financially, grantees reported increased revenue, improved cash flow, and stronger planning capacity. Operational improvements included better efficiency, expanded service offerings, and enhanced customer experience. Several recipients cited the grants as instrumental in transitioning from seasonal or unstable operations to more consistent, year-round business models.

## **IV. Economic Impact on the Community**

The program played a measurable role in job creation and retention. Some businesses were able to hire new employees, while others sustained critical staff through uncertain periods. These job outcomes had secondary effects on local economies, with increased household income supporting local spending and community vitality. Several grantees noted that maintaining or increasing staff capacity allowed them to expand hours, improve customer service, and better meet community needs. Businesses also reported contributing to the local economy through regional supply chain partnerships, expanded procurement, and new service offerings that increased local commerce. These effects often extended to other businesses and community organizations, creating a ripple effect that stimulated broader economic engagement. In many instances, grant-supported



improvements allowed businesses to invest in local contractors, suppliers, and creative professionals, further circulating funds within the regional economy. In some cases, the investments laid the foundation for sustained long-term benefits by strengthening local business ecosystems, fostering entrepreneurship, and helping communities retain core services such as childcare, cultural amenities, and essential retail.

## **V. Social and Community Impact**

Grants enabled businesses to improve access to goods, services, and amenities that are critical to quality of life in rural communities. This included expanded childcare options, improved retail and food service access, and enhanced cultural and tourism offerings that serve both residents and visitors. Several grantees reported that grant funding allowed them to make their spaces more accessible, welcoming, or weather-resilient, enhancing community use and year-round viability. Businesses also deepened their community connections by engaging in local events, forming partnerships with schools and nonprofits, and supporting charitable or civic efforts, including fundraising drives, food security programs, and youth initiatives. Many owners described a renewed sense of purpose and belonging as they saw their businesses serve not only as commercial hubs but also as gathering spaces that foster inclusivity and civic pride. These efforts helped rebuild trust in the small business community, amplified the visibility of local entrepreneurs, and fostered stronger social ties across the region, laying a foundation for ongoing community-led revitalization.

## **VI. Success Stories**

### **Penobscot Bay Estate: Coastal Resilience and Community Ripple Effect**

Penobscot Bay Estate, a waterfront wedding venue located in Winterport, experienced pandemic related loss due to delayed construction and increased costs due to supply chain issues. Owner Emerald Forcier used the grant funding to address pressing environmental challenges that were threatening both the property and business continuity. Frequent flash flooding and shoreline erosion had begun to impact operations, limiting the venue's ability to host events consistently and safely. With support from the HUB grant, the business implemented substantial earthwork improvements, including regrading its parking lot and event lawn, reinforcing shoreline with rock support, and stabilizing the surrounding landscape to mitigate stormwater impacts.

These upgrades have enabled the venue to confidently host events in all weather conditions, expanding its capacity to serve clients rain-or-shine. The improvements also freed up internal resources, allowing the owners to invest in the renovation of a basement-level Speakeasy lounge, creating a unique and safe indoor option for guests during lightning storms and other inclement weather. This added feature has enhanced the overall experience and reliability of the venue, while expanding its client base by offering an event space perfect for community and business events.



The economic impact of Penobscot Bay Estate extends far beyond its own operations. Each weekend, the venue draws weddings with budgets ranging from \$50,000 to \$120,000, with spending dispersed widely across Maine's event economy. Local caterers, bar services, wait staff, florists, photographers, beauty professionals, and rental companies all benefit from these events. Additionally, wedding guests contribute to the broader local economy through hotel stays, Airbnb bookings, restaurant visits, and retail shopping in nearby towns. The venue's ability to reliably host high-value events, thanks in part to this grant, demonstrates the far-reaching value of targeted investment in rural, tourism-driven businesses.

### **Mis Primeros Pasos (My First Steps): Expanding Childcare Access**

Mis Primeros Pasos (My First Steps), a licensed childcare provider located in Ellsworth, experienced pandemic related loss due to capacity limitations and extended periods of business closure. Owner Thania Hernandez used the grant to make critical supply upgrades that expanded the daycare's capacity to serve families in the region. With the addition of new room dividers and other essential equipment, the business was able to reconfigure its space and open additional rooms, allowing more children to be safely enrolled and cared for.

As one of the only childcare options in the area, this expansion addressed a pressing community need. The increased capacity has not only benefited working families but also had a meaningful impact on the local workforce. Parents and caregivers who had previously been unable to work, or who were limited to part-time hours due to lack of childcare, have now been able to return to the labor force or increase their availability, strengthening the community and contributing to overall economic activity.

The grant also helped improve the safety, functionality, and learning environment of the center, supporting the healthy development of children in the community. Mis Primeros Pasos has become a trusted and essential resource for families over the years, and its continued growth represents a powerful example of how targeted investment in childcare infrastructure can remove barriers to employment and build stronger, more resilient communities.

### **The Phoenix on Water Street – Revitalizing Downtown Eastport**

The Phoenix on Water Street, a wine bar and gathering space in Eastport's historic downtown, was affected by the pandemic because of construction delays and increased material costs due to supply chain issues. Owner Laura Stanczyk used the grant funding to continue the initial construction plans, making critical exterior improvements to its building and consequently expand its food service offerings. Located in one of the area's iconic storefronts, the business has contributed to the visual and cultural vibrancy of the downtown district.

The upgrades allowed for enhanced customer experience, expanded menu offerings, and increased operating hours, all of which led to the creation of new jobs and greater





economic activity. With a fully staffed restaurant and wine bar, Phoenix has become a destination for locals and tourists alike, drawing new foot traffic to Eastport's downtown and complementing other nearby businesses.

Beyond the direct business outcomes, the visual transformation of the building sparked momentum among other property owners. Several local entrepreneurs were inspired to invest in their own storefronts - purchasing, restoring, or reimagining properties in the surrounding area. This project helped reinvigorate a sense of pride and possibility in the community.

Widely regarded as a pillar of Eastport, Laura's leadership and reinvestment have contributed not only to her business's growth but also to the broader narrative of renewal in the region. With rising tourism and renewed local engagement, The Phoenix on Water Street exemplifies how strategic support for community-based businesses can catalyze downtown revitalization and strengthen community identity.

### **Pleasant and Center: Local Growth with Regional Reach**

Pleasant and Center, a woman-owned business located in Monson, Maine, delayed opening her business due to the pandemic, citing rising costs and the uncertainty of sustainability of nonessential businesses. Owner Cassandra Hefferan used the grant funding to complete essential upgrades to the business's commercial kitchen. Previously limited to catering, the business was able to transition into a full-service bakery and café, unlocking new revenue streams and creating a welcoming community space for both residents and visitors.

Located just a few miles from the start of the Appalachian Trail, Pleasant and Center has seen a notable increase in foot traffic since opening its doors for service. Proximity to Airbnbs and a local hostel has made the café a convenient and popular stop for hikers and travelers seeking breakfast or coffee before heading into the North Woods. The business has not only boosted local visibility in an area off the main travel route but has also played a role in drawing more visitors to Monson.

Beyond business growth, Pleasant and Center has created a positive impact on the local entrepreneurial ecosystem. The owner actively offers consulting and peer support to aspiring and early-stage business owners in the region, helping others navigate permitting, operations, and business planning. This informal mentorship has encouraged others to pursue their own ventures, amplifying the impact of the original grant.

With plans to continue expanding services and fill additional gaps in the local market, Pleasant and Center is emerging as a commercial anchor and a community catalyst, demonstrating how targeted investment in rural small businesses can generate long-term, community-based economic and social returns.

### **Korean Dad: Powering Culinary Startups**





Korean Dad, a popular Korean fusion restaurant based in Veazie, Maine, experienced rising costs due to pandemic related supply chain issues. Owner Chongsu Kristopher Lee used the grant funding to install solar panels on its commercial kitchen facility, an investment that significantly reduced operating costs and ensured the long-term sustainability of its unique community-centered model. The project was completed in partnership with local business Black Bear Solar, keeping the work and impact local.

While Korean Dad operates one day a week, the remaining six days are dedicated to supporting aspiring food entrepreneurs. The restaurant offers full use of the commercial kitchen and dining space at no cost to business owners looking to test restaurant concepts, build a following, and gain real-world experience before committing to a permanent location. This innovative model has lowered the barrier to entry for dozens of startup chefs and food business owners, helping them develop loyal customer bases and refine their offerings in a real service environment.

The solar installation, made possible by the HUB grant, has dramatically cut energy expenses, allowing Korean Dad to continue offering the space free of charge to local entrepreneurs. This investment directly reinforces the business's ability to nurture culinary talent and expand economic opportunity in the region.

Korean Dad's kitchen has become a launchpad for small food ventures, and the ripple effect is evident in the growing network of entrepreneurs who have benefited from the space. It stands as a model for how energy efficiency upgrades, when aligned with community goals, can create significant economic and community impacts.

### **Dreamer Food: From Shared Space to Waterfront Success**

Dreamer Food, a Lebanese food truck now serving customers at the Bangor Waterfront, experienced pandemic related loss due to rising product costs due to supply chain issues. Owner Anik DerPhilibossian began her journey in the shared commercial kitchen at Korean Dad in Veazie. With support from the HUB grant, Dreamer Food was able to purchase a tow vehicle, an essential investment that allowed the business to move its food trailer to a more permanent, high-traffic location and operate independently.

Now positioned among other small businesses at the bustling waterfront, Dreamer Food has experienced a steady increase in foot traffic and visibility. The prime location has expanded their customer base and created new opportunities for growth, exposure, and community engagement.

Dreamer Food has continued its connection to the Korean Dad network by partnering with other restaurant pop-ups to offer collaborative, cross-cultural menu items, bringing together diverse flavors and food traditions for the Bangor community. These collaborations not only celebrate culinary creativity but also demonstrate the strength of the supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem fostered through Korean Dad's kitchen model.



Dreamer Food's story reflects how targeted investment and community-centered infrastructure can help minority-owned businesses scale, thrive, and enrich the cultural fabric of the local economy.

## **VII. Challenges and Barriers**

Some businesses faced challenges using the grant funds due to delays in fund disbursement or constraints related to inflation and high operating costs. At the community level, barriers such as housing shortages, limited transportation infrastructure, and post-pandemic consumer trends affected the extent of recovery. Despite these obstacles, grantees were able to utilize the funds effectively and reported the program was well-structured and responsive to their needs.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

The Economic Recovery Implementation HUB program successfully leveraged public funding to drive small business recovery and community revitalization across Penobscot and Eastern Maine. Through a combination of direct grants, targeted technical assistance, and sustained partner collaboration, the program empowered entrepreneurs to stabilize, adapt, and grow in a rapidly shifting economic environment. The grants enabled businesses to expand services, improve infrastructure, and extend operating capacity, results that directly contributed to job creation, increased local procurement, and a more resilient regional economy.

In addition to financial support, businesses benefited from planning guidance, marketing expertise, and entrepreneurial training that strengthened operational foundations and long-term strategic direction. The program's collaborative design ensured that resources were not only distributed efficiently but also aligned with local needs and capacities.

With coordinated technical assistance and strong regional partnerships, the initiative demonstrated that small, strategic investments in early-stage businesses can produce compounding effects, stimulating economic activity, improving quality of life, and reinforcing community identity. These findings underscore the importance of targeted support for rural enterprises as a tool for inclusive economic development, innovation, and long-term resilience.

## **IX. Appendices**

### **Appendix 1**

#### **Grant Efficiency Interview Questions**

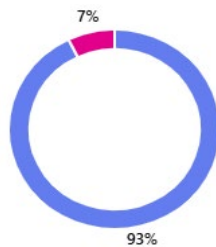
1. How did you use the grant funds? (e.g., equipment, staffing, marketing, operations)

2. What measurable changes has your business experienced since receiving the grant? (e.g., increased revenue, new customers, expanded services)
3. Did the grant help you retain or hire employees? If so, how many?
4. How were you able to maintain or expand your operations because of the grant?
5. Have you formed any new partnerships or collaborations as a result of this funding?
6. Did the grant help your business better serve the local community? If so, how?
7. What challenges, if any, did you face in using the grant effectively?
8. How has the grant impacted your long-term business stability or growth outlook?
9. Have you noticed any broader community impacts tied to your grant-funded activities? (e.g., increased foot traffic, local services, community perception)
10. If you could change anything about the grant process, what would it be?
11. Would you be willing to serve as a case study or success story in the final report?
12. Is there anything else you'd like to share about the experience or impact of receiving this grant?

## Appendix 2

### Final Hub Recipient Survey Questions & Answers: 14 Anonymous Responses

1. Has your business experienced improved financial stability due to the grant and technical assistance?



2. Please provide an estimate of the amount of revenue your business has generated as a result of the grant and technical assistance.



# EMDC

\$450,000

1,000

10k

\$30000

Approximately \$130,000.

18-20%

\$1500

12k

\$3~4,000 saving in electrical bills a year

\$15,000

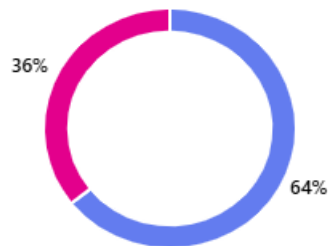
difficult to quantify

20,000

Next season we project an increase of approximately 5,000 to 7,000 with increased growth in future seasons.

\$5,000-7,000

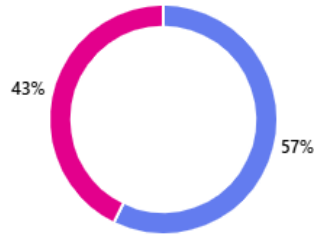
3. Has your business expanded operations as a result of the grant and technical assistance?



4. Did the grant and technical assistance prevent your business from closing, or becoming at risk of closure?



5. Has your business already, or will it in the future, hire additional employees as a result of the grant and technical assistance?



6. Please provide an estimate of how many employees you have or will hire as a result of the grant and technical assistance.

7

2

1-2

1

1

4

one part-time

1

## Appendix 3

### List of All Grant Recipients

Award Organization	Awardee City
A Time to Rise - Counseling & Wellness LLC	Brewer
Acadia Charter Company	Bernard
Acadia Wilderness Lodge	Tremont
Among Friends Salon	Winterport
Anchored Women's Health	Ellsworth
Bella Weidner Art	Searsport
Big Lake RV & Campground	Big Lake TWP
Bootleg Jerky	Columbia
Boulier Brothers Welding	Bangor
C.W. Plumbing	Lincoln
Cardtastic Collectibles and More	Old Town
Clean Maine Carbon	Greenville
ClubHouse Childcare	Dover-Foxcroft
COVORT LLC	Bangor
Done Roving Yarns & Home Décor	Calais



# EMDC

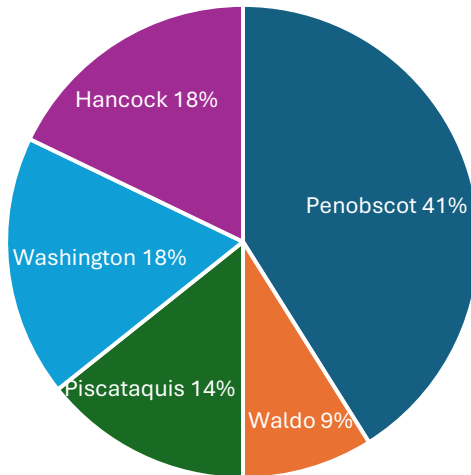
Dreamer Food  
Frugal Mainer  
G & O Properties LLC  
Heather Lux Leadership (True North Development)  
Highlands Lodging Inc DBA the Lodge at Moosehead Lake & 368 Maine  
Horn Run Brewing  
Inked Beauty By Sen (Legacy Skin & Beauty)  
Innovative Welding  
Korean Dad  
Lily Cat Antiques  
Loring Construction LLC  
Maine Camp Outfitters  
MEPSCO LLC  
Moosabec Medical  
Moosehead Lakeshore Journal  
Mis Primeros Pasos (My First Steps)  
Penobscot Auto Repair  
Penobscot Bay Estate  
Pheonix On Water Street  
Pleasant and Center  
ProWeld  
Quietside Snacks  
Quoddy Spray Foam  
Ranco Fisheries  
Red Rabbit Bazaar  
Simple Sentiments of Maine  
Spooky Barbie Healing  
St. Croix Tap & Table  
Sue's Cobstook Cafe  
Talty Literary Solutions  
Tango Maine  
The Beauty Artist Maine  
The Block - AC Training LLC  
The Club Marina and Bar  
The Village Kitchen  
The Whistling Buoy  
Thompson Market and Gardens  
Trove  
Two Knights Brewing  
Waffle Wednesday  
Wallace Interiors

Bangor  
Old Town  
Glenburn  
Lake View Plt  
Greenville  
Eastport  
Bangor  
Levant  
Veazie  
Monson  
Old Town  
Sunset  
Bangor  
Jonesport  
Greenville  
Ellsworth  
Indian Island  
Winterport  
Eastport  
Monson  
Charlotte  
Bernard  
Indian TWP  
Waltham  
Bangor  
Lincoln  
Brewer  
Calais  
Edmunds TWP  
Levant  
Orono  
Bucksport  
Brewer  
Stockton Springs  
Hermon  
Trenton  
Medway  
Searsport  
Sangerville  
Veazie  
Trenton

## Appendix 4

### Awards by County

### HUB Awards by County

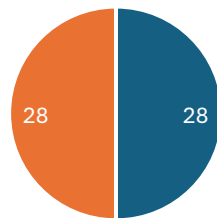


## Appendix 5

### Awards by Region

### HUB Awards by Region

Penobscot (Penobscot & Waldo) & Eastern Maine (Hancock, Piscataquis, Washington)



■ Penobscot ■ Eastern Maine

## Appendix 6

### EMDC HUB Press

- Bangor Daily News - [EMDC launches program to empower post-2020 businesses](#)
- Piscataquis Observer - [Eastern Maine Development Corporation awards \\$424K to Maine businesses](#)
- Bangor Daily News - [EMDC awards \\$1.4M in grants to 56 small businesses through Economic Recovery Hub Program](#)