



# 2026 FEDERAL POLICY POSITIONS & PRIORITIES

# INTRODUCTION

Dear Partners and Stakeholders,

Small businesses are the backbone of the American economy. They create jobs, anchor communities, drive innovation, and serve as pathways to economic mobility and wealth creation. Yet too often, public policy, market structures, and emerging technologies evolve without fully accounting for the realities small business owners face.

At AEO, our role is to ensure that the small business ecosystem—entrepreneurs, lenders, service providers, policymakers, and corporate leaders—moves forward together. In 2026, our work is anchored in two critical platforms: the **Small Business Growth Coalition**, which aligns national advocacy around core economic priorities, and the **AI Policy Coalition**, which advances responsible innovation and technology policy that works for small businesses.

This Policy Agenda reflects AEO's commitment to shaping solutions that are practical, forward-looking, and grounded in the lived experiences of business owners across the country. Through research, convening, and coalition leadership, we are building a stronger, more resilient small business economy—one that fuels growth, opportunity, and shared prosperity.

Sincerely,



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Natalie Madeira Cofield". The script is fluid and cursive.

Natalie Madeira Cofield,  
President & CEO

# ABOUT AEO

The Association for Enterprise Opportunity (AEO) is the nation's leading advocate for small businesses and entrepreneurial ecosystems, dedicated to advancing economic opportunities in rural and urban communities. Since 1991, AEO has been at the forefront of empowering small business owners by addressing critical challenges in access to capital, market opportunities, and business development resources. Through a powerful network of organizations, service providers, and advocates, AEO drives systemic change by promoting equitable policies, fostering strategic partnerships, and delivering innovative programs. By amplifying the voices of entrepreneurs and reshaping the economic landscape, AEO is committed to ensuring that small businesses remain the engine of local economies and vibrant communities.

## MISSION

We aim to reshape policies to empower underserved small businesses by addressing barriers to capital, market access, and economic opportunity, ensuring a more equitable environment where entrepreneurs can thrive and drive economic growth.

## AEO AS AN ECOSYSTEM



This policy agenda outlines AEO's strategic priorities for 2026 and is aimed at fostering inclusive growth and supporting entrepreneurs from across the nation.

## 1 Expanding Access to Capital and Financial Innovation

**AEO advocates for a diverse and resilient financing landscape that meets the needs of small businesses at every stage.**

- Support the expansion of flexible financing tools, including microloans, patient capital, equity-based financing, and revenue-based products.
- Strengthen federal and state investment in Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) and Minority Depository Institutions (MDIs).
- Advance policies that encourage responsible alternative financing models, including crowdfunding and peer-to-peer lending.
- Advance truth-in-small-business-lending standards that require clear, standardized disclosure of APR (or equivalent), fees, total cost of capital, and repayment terms so entrepreneurs can compare offers and avoid hidden costs.

## 2 Strengthening Business Development, Workforce Capacity, and Digital Competitiveness

**AEO promotes policies that ensure business owners have the skills, tools, and advisory support needed to compete and scale.**

- Increase investment in technical assistance, mentorship, and sector-specific business development services.
- Expand access to affordable digital tools, broadband, and technology training.
- Support innovation grants and public-private partnerships that help businesses modernize operations and reach new markets.
- Invest in shared back-office infrastructure for very small employers (e.g., pooled HR/payroll/benefits administration) delivered through trusted intermediaries (CDFIs, SBDCs, BSOs, chambers, sector partnerships).
- Protect Medicaid and improve Marketplace affordability and continuity (premium subsidies, reduced churn, simplified enrollment/renewal) to expand access to stable health coverage for entrepreneurs and workers in small businesses.
- Support portable coverage pathways that reduce the all-or-nothing dependence on employer-sponsored insurance for workers in small businesses.
- Improve plan comparability in Marketplaces (e.g., standardized plan options and clearer total-out-of-pocket estimates) so consumers can shop on value, not complexity.



## 3 Advancing Manufacturing and Supply Chain Participation

**Manufacturing remains a critical pathway to job creation and economic growth.**

- Support policies that expand access to capital and technical assistance for small and mid-sized manufacturers.
  - Promote domestic supply chain inclusion through procurement reform and supplier diversity initiatives.
  - Encourage workforce development and apprenticeship programs aligned with advanced manufacturing and clean production.
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## 4 Supporting Rural Entrepreneurship and Place-Based Growth

**AEO champions policies that recognize the unique opportunities and challenges facing rural businesses.**

- Expand rural lending, infrastructure investment, and broadband access.
  - Support place-based economic development strategies that strengthen local business ecosystems.
  - Promote regional collaboration among rural entrepreneurs, lenders, and anchor institutions.
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## 5 Empowering Veteran-Owned Businesses

**Veteran entrepreneurs bring leadership, resilience, and innovation to the economy.**

- Expand access to capital and procurement opportunities for veteran-owned businesses.
- Support entrepreneurship transition programs for service members and veterans.
- Promote coordination across federal agencies to streamline resources and technical assistance.

## 6 Harnessing Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technologies

**AEO supports responsible innovation that enables small businesses to leverage emerging technologies.**

- Promote access to AI tools that improve operations, financial management, and customer engagement.
  - Support training and upskilling programs that prepare business owners and workers for an AI-enabled economy.
  - Advocate for ethical AI governance, transparency, and data privacy protections in lending, hiring, and procurement.
  - Encourage public and private investment in applied research and pilot programs tailored to small business needs.
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## 7 Strengthening Cybersecurity and Digital Resilience

**Cybersecurity is a core business continuity and economic security issue for small businesses.**

- Advocate for increased federal and state investment in small business cybersecurity readiness, including grants, vouchers, and shared services.
- Support access to affordable cybersecurity tools, risk assessments, and incident response resources for small businesses.
- Promote public-private partnerships that connect small businesses with trusted cybersecurity providers, universities, and national labs.
- Advance workforce development and certification pathways to build a pipeline of cybersecurity talent supporting small enterprises.
- Support clear, scalable cybersecurity standards and guidance that protect businesses without imposing undue compliance burdens.

## Commitment to Opportunity for American Entrepreneurs

The Association for Enterprise Opportunity (AEO) is steadfast in its commitment to advancing equitable access to economic opportunity by advocating for the continuation and expansion of federal programs that empower diverse communities. These initiatives, which include targeted support based on marginalized communities play a pivotal role in fostering inclusive entrepreneurship and bridging disparities in business development. AEO recognizes the transformative impact of these programs on small businesses across rural and urban areas and is dedicated to ensuring their sustainability and effectiveness as vital tools for economic growth and access.

### AEO supports the continuation of the following federal programs, among others:

- Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) Program
- 8(a) Business Development Program
- HUBZone Program
- Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB) Federal Contracting Program
- Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business (SDVOSB) Program
- Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) Program
- Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA) Programs
- Rural Business Development Grants (RBDG)
- Indian Incentive Program (IIP)
- Native American Business Development Institute (NABDI) Grant
- Alaska Native Corporation (ANC) 8(a) Program
- Native Hawaiian Organization (NHO) 8(a) Program
- Tribal Energy Development Capacity (TEDC) Grant Program
- Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) Programs
- Delta Regional Authority (DRA) Programs
- Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) Programs
- Denali Commission Programs
- Economic Development Administration (EDA) Programs for Distressed Areas
- Opportunity Zone Program
- New Markets Tax Credit (NMTC) Program
- State Small Business Credit Initiative (SSBCI)
- Tribal Economic Development Bond Program
- Social Impact Partnerships to Pay for Results Act (SIPPPRA)
- HUD Section 3 Skills Training Program