



Denver ESE Collective

Building the ecosystem for Denver's employment social enterprises

A Denver where a good job is within reach of everyone, no matter their past, and where business that builds people up is simply how business is done.

THE MODEL

Employment social enterprises (ESEs) are mission-driven organizations that are two things at once: real, revenue-generating businesses, and on-ramps to work for people facing serious barriers to employment. That includes people coming home from incarceration, in recovery, experiencing homelessness, living with disabilities, or new to the country as immigrants and refugees. ESEs hire the people most employers overlook, then pair a paycheck with the support to keep it. It's the most effective workforce model there is for people facing barriers to work, because the job is real on day one.

Denver's ESEs are part of a proven national movement. Since 1997, ESEs backed by Redefine Alliance (REDF) have **employed 176,000+ people and generated \$4B+ in revenue** across 44 states and D.C.

WHO WE ARE (WE'RE NOT NEW TO THIS)

The Denver ESE Collective is the connective infrastructure for this growing sector. We're led by seasoned ESE practitioners: **Steph Frances, founder of Prodigy Coffee**, and **Andy Magel, founder of Mile High WorkShop**. Both have built and run these businesses themselves; we're not consultants looking in from outside. We're an initiative of **WorkWell, a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit** (est. 2023; EIN 92-1420199), and we've been convening and strengthening Denver's ESEs **since 2024**.

WHAT WE DO

Connect. Quarterly gatherings, informal meetups, and a real peer community, so ESE leaders stop working in isolation. We connect ESEs with each other for shared business development and learning, and with the employers and community supports around them.

Support. Hands-on help with strategy, staffing, program design, and sales and business development; strategic-planning tools; and the Emerging Leaders cohort, which develops the next generation of ESE leaders.

Elevate. Storytelling, a public directory and interactive map of the sector, funder and community education, and policy work toward a Colorado definition of an ESE, modeled on Illinois's 2026 ESE law.

The best philanthropic deal in Denver. Every person an ESE moves into work replaces a major public cost. Independent estimates put the annual cost of one person cycling through incarceration at roughly **\$19,000–\$81,000**, and of one person experiencing homelessness in Denver at **\$41,700–\$104,200**. Conservatively, that's **\$50,000+ per person, every year**.

The math. At our fully scaled budget of **\$300,000**, the Collective only needs to help the sector employ **six more people a year** than it otherwise would to pay for itself entirely. A sector of 40+ Denver ESEs already places far more than that. Everything beyond those six is return to the community.

And it flips positive. National research on ESEs (REDF, evaluated by Mathematica) finds **\$2.23 returned to society for every \$1 invested**: wages rise, reliance on public benefits falls from 71% to 24%, and housing stability more than triples. The person doesn't just stop costing; they start contributing.

WHERE DENVER STANDS, AND WHAT YOUR INVESTMENT BUILDS

We measure progress against **Redefine Alliance's Ecosystem Maturity Model**, which tracks eight signals of a healthy ESE ecosystem across four stages: Emerging, Expanding, Maturing and Self-sustaining. Denver today is **Emerging, and pushing into Expanding**. Our strength is the number of ESEs already here. The biggest gaps are coalition building, policy and procurement. Here's each signal, and our plan for 2027.

Signal of a healthy ecosystem	Where Denver is today	What we'll do in 2027
ESEs: number, performance and outcomes	Expanding Our strength: 40+ ESEs	Hands-on support for ESEs that want to grow, and the first State of Denver ESE report (2026 data).
Coalition building	Emerging A key gap	Four quarterly gatherings, informal meetups, and a regular sector newsletter.
Policy and public funding	Emerging A key gap	Convene a Colorado ESE policy working group toward a state definition of an ESE.
Capital for ESEs	Emerging	Three to four funder education sessions, and building multi-year support for the field.
Procurement (buying from ESEs)	Emerging A key gap	Connect ESEs with buyers, including through Purchasing with Purpose and Procure Impact.*
Employers who hire and promote people facing barriers	Emerging	Draw on our many employer relationships across Denver, and on networks like Recovery Friendly Workplace, to connect ESEs and their graduates with employers ready to hire them.*
Wider community benefits (housing, safety, family stability)	Emerging Not yet measured	Gather wage and stability outcomes from ESEs, using shared tools such as CEEMI's WORC project where they fit, and report them in the State of Denver ESE report.
A local backbone organization	Emerging Active since 2024	Run Emerging Leaders cohort #2 (8 to 12 leaders) and serve as the sector's connective infrastructure.

** Pursued as funding grows. Everything else is a firm 2027 commitment. We'll report progress on every signal each year.*

ALREADY IN MOTION

A live public directory and interactive map of 40+ Denver ESEs · quarterly sector gatherings since 2024 · our first Emerging Leaders cohort, underway now · partnerships with Purchasing with Purpose and CEEMI's WORC project · a monthly working group with Redefine Alliance · **\$40,000 raised in our first year** from funders who already believe, including the Kenneth King Foundation and Redefine Alliance (REDF).

THE INVITATION, AND WHAT YOUR GIFT RETURNS

We're seeking a small number of **multi-year operating commitments** from partners who will invest in the team that builds and sustains this ecosystem, so we spend less time fundraising and more time building. In the spirit of backing people you believe in: invest in us, and we'll grow the field.

The math is on your side. Each person who gets and keeps a job saves Denver about \$50,000 a year. If we help the sector employ just 12 more people a year, every dollar invested comes back to Denver twice (at our full-scale \$300,000 budget).

You give each year	Denver gets back each year	Over a three-year commitment
\$10,000	\$20,000	\$60,000 back from \$30,000
\$25,000	\$50,000	\$150,000 back from \$75,000
\$50,000	\$100,000	\$300,000 back from \$150,000

Every partner also gets: an annual progress report on all eight signals · the State of Denver ESE report · an invitation to our 2027 funder gatherings · an open door to visit ESEs with us.

Gifts are tax-deductible. An initiative of WorkWell, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit (EIN 92-1420199). denverese.org · map.denverese.org · invest.denverese.org · Andy Magel, Executive Director · andy@denverese.org

Sources: Annual cost of incarceration per person, Colorado Department of Corrections. Annual cost of a person experiencing homelessness in Denver, Common Sense Institute, "The Economic Footprint of Homelessness in Metro Denver". \$2.23 social return per \$1 invested, REDF employment social enterprises evaluated by Mathematica. National ESE figures, Redefine Alliance (cumulative since 1997). Ecosystem Maturity Model, Redefine Alliance.