

# RURAL ENTREPRENEURIAL POLICY ACADEMY & FORUM

The Entrepreneurial Policy Academy & Forum sought to educate rural entrepreneurs in Colorado on how to engage on and advocate for stronger legislative policies. This project was a joint undertaking by Silicon Flatirons, Startup Colorado, and Telluride Foundation, and was made possible by America's New Business Plan Grant from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

**WHY?** Even pre-pandemic, the policy foundation for small businesses in the United States has become increasingly important to address the decline in entrepreneurship and equitable opportunities across the country.

SILICON FLATIRONS, STARTUP COLORADO  
& THE TELLURIDE FOUNDATION, SPONSORED BY THE KAUFFMAN FOUNDATION,  
DEVELOPED & DELIVERED:

**1** ENTREPRENEURIAL  
POLICY ROUNDTABLE

**1** 2-DAY PILOT  
POLICY ACADEMY

**WITH 9** POLICY EXPERTS **+** **7** RURAL ENTREPRENEURS

**8 WEEKS** OF COHORT BUILDING  
+ ADVOCACY PREPARATION

**1** ENTREPRENEURIAL  
POLICY FORUM

**WITH 8** STATE + FEDERAL  
POLICYMAKERS

**THE COHORT OF 7**  
**WITH**

**6** POLICY PRESENTATIONS  
TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES + SOLUTIONS

**UP NEXT:**

DUPLICATE POLICY ACADEMY +  
ESTABLISH 2020 COHORT AS A RURAL ENTREPRENEURIAL POLICY COALITION

# RURAL ENTREPRENEURIAL POLICY ACADEMY OUTCOME REPORT

## SUMMARY

The Entrepreneurial Policy Academy sought to educate rural entrepreneurs in Colorado on how to engage on and advocate for stronger legislative policies. This project was a joint undertaking by Silicon Flatirons, Startup Colorado, and Telluride Foundation, and was made possible by America's New Business Plan Grant from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

Silicon Flatirons managed the process of identifying nine policy experts and overseeing the Academy's curriculum development. Presenters received teaching module guidelines and feedback and edits on initial drafts of their modules.

The pre-academy regionally-focused roundtable, hosted virtually by Startup Colorado on September 24, 2020, provided hopeful Academy candidates an insight into the work of policy and advocacy. An overview of the initiative and the Academy application was shared with participants as well as on websites for **Silicon Flatirons** and **Startup Colorado**. Startup Colorado managed the Academy application process by engaging its existing statewide, rural network of entrepreneurs. Seven entrepreneurs were selected from nearly twenty competitive applicants.

The virtual Academy was hosted by Silicon Flatirons on November 12th and 13th, 2020. Over two days, rural entrepreneurs attended a series of nine 30-minute presentations covering topics related to technology and policy advocacy. Following the Academy, entrepreneurs participated in Vista Caballo's Stillpoint Experience to navigate preparing for the culminating Policy Forum. The virtual Policy Forum was hosted by Telluride Foundation on December 11, 2020, where entrepreneurs presented their solutions and policy recommendations to state and federal legislative and agency representatives. The Forum marked the beginning of an ongoing, robust dialogue between rural entrepreneurs and policymakers.

**"Thanks so much for this opportunity! Really appreciate the time, energy, and effort that went into it. I think it's a great concept and I hope to see it grow and develop in the years to come!"**

- Taryn Mead, PhD, Western Colorado University, Outdoor Industry MBA

---

## PARTICIPANTS

### ENTREPRENEURS

#### **Jonathan Ballesteros**

CEO, Geyser Systems  
Montrose

Jonathan is the founder and CEO of Geyser Systems. Geyser Systems manufactures the world's most advanced, hot, portable shower that uses less than one gallon of water.

[linkedin.com/in/ballesterosjonathan](https://www.linkedin.com/in/ballesterosjonathan)  
[geysersystems.com](http://geysersystems.com)

#### **Andrew Beckler**

CEO, Grass Sticks  
Steamboat Springs

Andrew is the founder and CEO of Grass Sticks, which makes beautifully handcrafted, high-performing, eco-friendly bamboo ski poles and paddles.

[linkedin.com/in/andrew-beckler-172676171](https://www.linkedin.com/in/andrew-beckler-172676171)  
[grassticks.com](http://grassticks.com)

#### **Emily Hisel**

CEO, Copper Key Tiny Homes  
Rifle

Emily is the president and founding member of Copper Key Tiny Homes, a mom-and-pop business that aims to use its 15 acre property in Rifle to build a tiny home pocket neighborhood.

[linkedin.com/in/emily-hisel-935b0685](https://www.linkedin.com/in/emily-hisel-935b0685)  
[copperkeytinyhomes.com](http://copperkeytinyhomes.com)

#### **Taryn Mead**

PhD, Western Colorado University,  
Outdoor Industry MBA  
Gunnison

Taryn runs a boutique consultancy and is a faculty member in the Outdoor Industry MBA at Western Colorado University. With a background in innovation and sustainability, Taryn teaches product strategy and supply chain management and also coaches many entrepreneurs in this role.

[linkedin.com/in/taryn-mead-phd-0823284](https://www.linkedin.com/in/taryn-mead-phd-0823284)

#### **Greg Olson**

CEO, GROWL Agency  
Grand Junction

Greg is the founder and CEO of Growl Agency, a marketing and technology agency located in Grand Junction. Greg has over 20 years of sales and marketing experience.

[linkedin.com/in/gpolson](https://www.linkedin.com/in/gpolson)  
[growlagency.com](http://growlagency.com)

#### **Dianna Reams**

CEO, Naturita Sales / CFO, Reams Construction  
Naturita

Dianna serves as CFO of Reams Construction Company and CEO of Naturita Sales, a retail, convenience store and fuel station.

[linkedin.com/in/dianna-reams-54a599a3](https://www.linkedin.com/in/dianna-reams-54a599a3)  
[naturitasales.com](http://naturitasales.com)

#### **Bryan Wachs**

CEO, QuikRStuff and MySalesButler.com  
Grand Junction

Bryan is CEO of MySalesButler, a flat-fee internet market service, and QuikRStuff, a startup that manufactures aluminum bike racks. Bryan has been involved in 35 business startups, expansions, mergers and acquisitions and exits since 1984.

[linkedin.com/in/bryanwachs](https://www.linkedin.com/in/bryanwachs)  
[mysalesbutler.com](http://mysalesbutler.com)  
[quikrstuff.com](http://quikrstuff.com)

---

## ENTREPRENEURIAL POLICY ACADEMY

The two-day Entrepreneurial Policy Academy was hosted by Silicon Flatirons on November 12th and 13th, 2020. The purpose of the Academy was to expose entrepreneurs to the tools necessary to engage and influence local, state, and federal policymakers. Academy participants were mailed a booklet of pre-reading materials, provided by the facilitators, to prepare for the Academy. Through nine 30-minute presentations, seven rural entrepreneurs learned about how to engage with lawmakers to advocate for policy changes. Each module was followed by a moderated Q&A session to allow the entrepreneurs to engage with the presenters.

### DAY ONE CURRICULUM

Day One began with introductions, an overview of the program, and a keynote address by Right to Start's Victor Hwang. He spoke about how to drive change as an entrepreneur and introduced Right to Start, a campaign to rebuild the American economy by putting entrepreneurs first. He explained the campaign's approach and goals and shared the **Right to Start Field Guide**.

#### **Beau Woods**, "Hacking Public Policy"

Beau is a Cyber Safety Innovation Fellow with the Atlantic Council, a leader with the I Am The Cavalry grassroots initiative, and Founder and CEO of Stratigos Security. He discussed how public policy is a tool to make a better status quo, optimized for all, through global, national, state, or local governance systems. He shared three case studies to identify lessons and approaches worth repeating to "hack" and influence public policy. He focused on how to influence policy by approaching policymakers with empathy and providing conceptual frameworks and simple explanations. He encouraged the cohort to pave their own way, even if it is unconventional.

#### **Cathy Gellis**, "Where Does Law Come From"

Cathy is a lawyer specializing in the convergence of technology and civil liberties. She discussed who makes policy and the processes through which policy is enacted and regulated. She documented the different kinds of federal administrative agencies and discussed different ways they receive feedback and comments from the public. She encouraged the cohort to find the agencies that impact them and their interests.

#### **Debra Brown and Karen Moldovan**, "Harnessing the Entrepreneurial Spirit for State Policy Change"

Debra is a founding member and Executive Director of Good Business Colorado and Karen is the Director of Policy at Good Business Colorado, a grassroots organization of values-driven business owners. They discussed the basics of the composition and structure of the Colorado state legislature and how a bill becomes a law, and specifically provided information to demystify the various ways in which the public can participate in this process. They discussed how best to communicate with legislators by developing an "elevator pitch" to explain why a legislative issue matters to them. They also shared a case study of a state policy win that stemmed from rural Colorado advocacy efforts, as well as Sales & Use Tax information.

>>

>>

**Joseph Jerome, “Engaging with State and Local Lawmakers”**

Joseph is the Director for Multistate Policy at Common Sense Media. He discussed how to maximize influence while developing relationships with state lawmakers, specifically by reaching out to legislative and executive offices, connecting your issue “sales pitch” to their interests or priorities, and the importance of follow-up in a productive manner. He also shared how to present and deliver impactful testimony before state and local hearings by emphasizing only 1-2 specific legislative or policy recommendations, providing memorable anecdotes or facts, and being responsive to lawmaker’s moods. In addition, he shared how to draft an impactful one-pager and other options to further share issues via community engagements or in the media through written pieces and press outreach.

**Chris Lewis, “Fundamentals of Lobbying Strategy”**

Chris is the President and CEO of Public Knowledge. He discussed the Strategy Triangle concept, demonstrating how lobbying and advocacy strategy depends on understanding policy (goals, details, and proposals), process (navigating the barriers of the legislative process), and intel (key stakeholders and what motivates them). He framed lobbying as “the art of the possible” and discussed a net neutrality case study to show how the right tools and strategy move the Overton Window – the range of politically conceivable responses on an issue. The cohort discussed the case study and applied concepts to their own policy issues.

## DAY TWO CURRICULUM

Day Two of the Academy followed a similar format. The day began by sharing reflections on the previous day’s presentations and discussing entrepreneurs’ individual policy areas of interest.

**Jeramie Scott, “Building and Working in Coalitions”**

Jeramie is Senior Counsel at EPIC and Director of the EPIC Domestic Surveillance Project. He discussed how to build coalitions by: identifying an overall issue or objective, framing the principles the coalition will support, seeking a diverse set of coalition members, developing personal relationships, and creating a communication channel. He also spoke about working in a coalition: identifying a specific issue, deciding whether coalition effort is needed, contacting coalition for buy-in, promoting coalition efforts through the media, and briefing members of the results from coalition efforts.

**Tarah Wheeler, “How to Break into Policy Commenting for Intergovernmental Organizations”**

Tarah is a Cyber Project Fellow at Harvard University, an International Security Fellow at New America, and a Fulbright Scholar in Cyber Security. She discussed keys to effective policy commenting in intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) including the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Economic Forum (WEF), and the United Nations. She shared resources for how to approach policy commenting for organizations relevant to the cohort. She also connected the cohort with organizations where they expressed interest in future participation.

>>

**“Overall I believe the experience was very valuable ... I really hope this is a jumping off point, and not the end of my participation and opportunity to talk with movers and shakers around the state.”**

- Emily Hisel, CEO, Copper Key Tiny Homes

>>

### **David Morar, “Private Governance”**

David is a Visiting Scholar with the Digital Trade and Data Governance Hub at the Elliott School of International Affairs, an Associate Editor of the Journal of Communication Technology, and a Founding Fellow at the Digital Interests Lab. He discussed the concept of private governance -- governance outside of formal government action -- and how private governance mechanisms allow entrepreneurs to engage in policy making. He spoke about different types and examples of private governance (standards, best practices, industry self-regulation, multistakeholderism), where entrepreneurs can enter the process, and ways to understand if such a mechanism is worth engaging (based on legitimacy, stakeholders inclusion and enforcement).

### **David Reed, “Impact of Broadband Infrastructure Policy on Rural Entrepreneurship”**

David is a Scholar in Residence at the University of Colorado Boulder and has served as a Telecommunications Policy Analyst in the Office of Plans and Policy at the Federal Communications Commission. He discussed rural “broadband vision,” the FCC’s definition of broadband service, and the different types of broadband technologies that can provide, and the policy goals of state and federal funding efforts to deploy broadband in rural areas to meet economic development policy. He also spoke about important ongoing questions regarding the transition to broadband as a universal service.

Day Two concluded by reiterating next steps towards presenting at the Forum, which included a discussion about forming an ongoing, informal coalition for rural small businesses in Colorado. Entrepreneurs were also given the option to participate in Vista Caballo’s 21-day **Stillpoint Experience**. This opportunity to develop and expand one’s thinking style aided their preparation for the Forum.

---

## **POST-ACADEMY PRESENTATION DEVELOPMENT**

A private, online networking group dedicated to Rural Entrepreneurial Policy was created at StartupColorado.org. This site was used as a resource center private to the cohort of entrepreneurs to keep all event recordings and resources accessible in one place. Updates on the presentation development were also shared on this private site.

The Stillpoint Experience Kick-off Event on November 17th introduced entrepreneurs to how the daily exercise would help the group present at the Forum. All seven entrepreneurs followed the exercises over the next 21 days.

Presentation development, review, and discussions took place on November 20th and 30th. All seven entrepreneurs attended each meeting. At these meetings, entrepreneurs agreed on the format of the presentation and which policy priority topics to discuss at the Forum. The Entrepreneurial Policy Academy team encouraged the group to focus on which specific policy requests they would present to policymakers. The cohort split into two groups to focus on the topics: (1) Eliminating Roadblocks within Existing Programs and (2) Startup Capital. Entrepreneurs developed slides and speaker notes in a shared Google Slides presentation. The Mock Policy Presentation on December 8th allowed the entrepreneurs to refine their presentations based on feedback from Karen Moldovan of Good Business Colorado and former State Senator, Ellen Roberts.



---

## POLICY FORUM

The Policy Forum was hosted virtually by Telluride Foundation on December 11th. The Forum was moderated by Brad Bernthal, Associate Professor at CU School of Law and Director of the Entrepreneurship Initiative for the Silicon Flatirons Center. CEO of Kauffman Foundation, Wendy Guillies, was introduced by Dan Tishman, the Chair of Telluride Foundation's Board of Directors, to address the state of entrepreneurship in America.

Through Telluride Foundation's strong relationships with state and federal elected officials, the following policymakers attended the Forum:

**Michael Bennet**, U.S. Senator

**Don Coram**, Colorado State Senate, 6th District

**Shane Fuhrman**, Mayor, Town of Silverton

**Sue Hansen**, Commissioner District 2

**John Hickenlooper**, U.S. Senator

**Betsy Markey**, Executive Director, Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade

**Jared Polis**, Colorado Governor

**Phil Weiser**, Colorado Attorney General

Policymakers were asked to come prepared to respond to one of the following three questions:

Discuss a policy (local, state, national) that you are advocating for that will help entrepreneurs in rural Colorado.

Explain an issue you are working on that would benefit from entrepreneurs' participation and also how that participation might benefit those entrepreneurs.

Discuss your passion for incorporating entrepreneurial values into policy making. How does this summit help make this happen?

Entrepreneurs shared their unique perspectives and articulated policy requests specific to local rural business in regards to eliminating roadblocks and receiving startup capital:

## LINKS TO 2020 RURAL ENTREPRENEURIAL POLICY FORUMS

Emily Hisel

Taryn Mead

Dianna Reams

Bryan Wachs

Greg Olson & Andrew Beckler

Jonathan Ballesteros

---

## SUMMARY OF POLICY REQUESTS

- >> Redefine definitions for 'rural' and 'small business', to create a proper structure for a clear policy and delivery system to truly support rural development and the majority of small businesses.  
**Watch here.**
- >> Eliminate the requirement to prequalify for enrollment in Enterprise Zones (EZ) credits. Unnecessary pre-application and certification requirements lockout small businesses without the resources to know about or maintain participation in the program.  
**Watch here.**
- >> Create flexibility and authority at the local level to propose relevant ratios for AMI (area median income) based on local economic conditions within policies, like HB19-1322 Expand Supply Affordable Housing.  
**Watch here.**
- >> Regarding startup capital, amend legislation to expand funds pooled by non-accredited investors beyond real-estate investments and into business ventures.  
**Watch here: Part One** and **Part Two.**
- >> Rural entrepreneurs and investors have unique circumstances related to startup capital that are not adequately understood.  
**Watch here.**
- >> The Forum concluded with a facilitated discussion in which policymakers and staffers responded to ideas that the entrepreneurs presented on.
- >> The Forum recording, summary of policy requests, and entrepreneurs' contact information was shared with the policymakers. Policy staffers' contact information was also shared with the entrepreneurs.

"As an organization created to help business leaders engage with the policies that impact their companies, communities and the environment, Good Business Colorado couldn't be more proud to have partnered on this remarkable program that innovatively facilitated participants' ability to become civically engaged! It was so rewarding to watch the light bulbs go off for the participating entrepreneurs as they connected their experiences with the larger issues, and began exploring potential solutions. It is hard to articulate just how impactful this program was, but it is certainly not an understatement to say that the Rural Entrepreneurial Policy Academy played an instrumental role in bridging the front-range rural divide and laid a solid foundation for bringing the very much absent and needed voices of rural entrepreneurs to the tables where decisions are made. We can't wait to see what V2 of this program looks like, and will be so proud to get to again play a small role in making the magic happen!"

- Debra Brown, Good Business Colorado



---

## FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

Entrepreneurs were sent a google form to share their reflections and feedback on their experience. The survey findings will inform future Entrepreneurial Policy Academy initiatives.

### SUMMARY OF SURVEY FINDINGS

#### Entrepreneurial Policy Academy Application Process

- The application should give a greater explanation of intended outcomes.

#### Entrepreneurial Policy Academy Curriculum

- The curriculum should include more about the state of policy related to entrepreneurship in Colorado.
- Most modules were rated by each entrepreneur as fairly useful, useful, or very useful.

#### Preparation for the Policy Forum

- Mock Policy Presentation was very helpful.
- Splitting into two groups was efficient and empowering.
- Lengthen the timeline: suggestion to allocate more time to engage with and discuss the current state of affairs before deciding on specific policy “asks.”

#### Policy Forum

- Ensure policymakers are fully present by having them engage in more of a listening role, and encourage them to ask questions during the discussion at the end.
- Have past participants help future cohorts prepare for the Forum.
- Each entrepreneur rated the overall experience as rewarding.

## NEXT STEPS

The cohort will continue to work in the online networking group at [StartupColorado.org](https://StartupColorado.org) dedicated to Rural Entrepreneurial Policy. The group desires to form an ongoing, informal coalition for rural small businesses in Colorado. The group has early buy-in and support from Colorado's policy advocacy organizations: Economic Development Council of Colorado, Good Business Colorado, and Small Business Majority.

