

# STRONG ECONOMIES, RESILIENT COUNTIES

The Role of Counties in Economic Development



NACo WHY COUNTIES MATTER PAPER SERIES • ISSUE 1 • July 2014 • [www.naco.org](http://www.naco.org)

## BERNALILLO COUNTY, NEW MEXICO

### Helping Small Businesses Grow



The most populous county in New Mexico, Bernalillo County is home to a number of federal government offices and research laboratories. Sandia National Laboratory, a U.S. Department of Agriculture field office, as well as government contractors such as Northrup Grumman and Raytheon have operations in the county. These facilities benefit from the highly educated labor force in the county; almost 32 percent of the residents 25 years or older have a Bachelor's degree or higher, significantly larger than the state 25.6 percent rate. With all the uncertainty around the federal budget, Bernalillo County is actively diversifying the county economy. While Bernalillo County helps businesses large and small to expand within the county, this case study provides a few examples of the latest county initiatives to assist small businesses and start ups and in the process to diversify the economy.

Bernalillo County Economic Development Department (EDD), housed in the County Community Services Division, is responsible for economic development activities developed on behalf of the county government. The Bernalillo County Commission created the EDD in 2007 with the purpose of fostering and enhancing local economic development efforts. The six staff members of the EDD work directly with the County Commission and Manager to strengthen the local economy by partnering with local governments and businesses in regional collaborations, providing entrepreneurial training programs for start-up firms and helping companies navigate permitting laws and lower their costs of doing business.

### The Increment of One Program

Through the Increment of One program, Bernalillo County nurtures nascent and existing small businesses in the county. Initiated by County Commissioner Art De La Cruz in November 2009, the Increment of One program works to strengthen businesses and encourage their expansion. With a large number of small businesses adding employees, the overall result would be a significant increase in job opportunities throughout the county. The program empowers local business expansion and encourages growth in new start-up businesses through networking events, access to capital through a public-private partnership called "the Loan Fund" and workforce development assistance through a partnership with the local Small Business Development Center (SBDC). The SBDC provides entrepreneurial training to start-up businesses, helping them develop

- **Population, 2013: 674,221**
- **County Board size: 5**
- **County Manager**

# STRONG ECONOMIES, RESILIENT COUNTIES

The Role of Counties in Economic Development



Architectural rendition of the Keshet Center for the Arts, a unique business incubator that provides support for startup arts-related businesses.

business plans and secure funding to be successful. Networking events can offer general guidance on small business creation and development, where new businesses have the opportunity to meet with more established business owners. Some of these events are industry-specific, such as a Buen Provecho, a 2013 event focused on restaurateurs. The Albuquerque event brought together successful restaurant owners and fledgling business owners to share best practices and lessons learned.

## The Keshet Dance Company Ideas and Innovation Center

In addition to the Increment of One program, Bernalillo County applies out-of-the-box thinking to enable creative application of existing financial incentives. One example is the Keshet Dance Company Ideas and Innovation Center, a unique business incubator founded in 2013. This incubator, an expansion of Keshet's original dance company, will provide support to struggling or start-up arts-related businesses in Albuquerque. Through a county ordinance, the Bernalillo County Commission participated in this expansion by voting to authorize a \$150,000 Local Economic Development Act grant to support the building improvements for the incubator. The Keshet Dance Company will use the funds for building improvements at the new location, which includes the new arts business incubator called the Ideas and Innovation Center.

Keshet has an extensive screening process of businesses that can set up in the center and prioritizes expanding businesses with an overt commitment to the arts. As of June 2014, two businesses have taken residency in the incubator building with a lease term of three years, with a possible two-year extension. The incubator building has rehearsal space, a soundstage and a theatre, and it plans to eventually support up to seven businesses within the space. Programs often feature an emphasis on real-world training and applicability, including business proposals, plans and models.

Bernalillo County promotes entrepreneurship as a means to diversify the county and utilize the specialized labor force. Through a variety of initiatives, the county is taking steps to encourage small businesses to expand and create jobs in Bernalillo County.