



NORTHERN CALIFORNIA
**Small Business
Development Center**

REQUEST FOR QUALIFICATIONS (RFQ) – NO. 2026-SBDC-03

Small Business Development Center (SBDC) Contract Business Advisors

ISSUED BY

Northern California SBDC Lead Center

a program of

California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt

Sponsored Programs Foundation

IMPORTANT DATES:

July 24, 2026	RFQ Issuance Date
July 31, 2026 12:00 – 1:30pm	Optional Business Advisors Meeting #1 (Online) REGISTER HERE
August 5, 2026 2:00 – 3:30pm	Optional Business Advisors Meeting #2 (Online) REGISTER HERE
September 3, 2026 5:00 PM PT	DEADLINE: Application Submission through the StartUpTree Portal
October 15, 2026 (or earlier)	Selected Business Advisors Notified

Questions about this RFQ should be directed to:

Kristin Johnson, NorCal SBDC Executive Director

707-496-7079 or partnerships@norcalsbdc.org

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Section 1. Introduction

1. NorCal SBDC Overview

The Northern California Small Business Development Center (NorCal SBDC) is one of the nation's largest and highest-performing small business assistance networks, serving entrepreneurs across 36 counties—from Crescent City to Aptos and from Truckee to San Jose. Through confidential advising, training and strategic partnerships, NorCal SBDC helps businesses start, grow, access capital, innovate, create jobs, and strengthen local economies.

2. RFQ Overview

This Request for Qualifications (RFQ) is being issued from the Northern California Small Business Development Center Program (NorCal SBDC) hosted by California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt Sponsored Programs Foundation (CPHSPF), which, through a shared cooperative agreement with the United States Small Business Administration (SBA), serves as host to the NorCal SBDC. This RFQ is intended to solicit independent small business advisors and consultants to work under contract in the delivery of high-quality services to small businesses and new entrepreneurs, allowing them to start and grow businesses, create jobs, increase sales, and gain capital and investment. The goal of this RFQ is to utilize a competitive process to identify existing and new talented business advisors that will achieve the greatest outcomes for the small business community in Northern California, while ensuring accountability, transparency, and impact for the state and federal taxpayer dollars used to fund the program.

We are seeking accomplished business professionals to join our statewide network of independent Business Advisors. Our Business Advisors are experienced executives, entrepreneurs, consultants, lenders, and industry specialists who are passionate about helping entrepreneurs solve problems, seize opportunities, and achieve measurable business results. Additional information regarding the opportunity and desired qualifications is provided in Section 4 (Business Advisor Opportunity & Desired Qualifications).

3. Quick Facts

- Issuing Entity— California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt – Sponsored Programs Foundation (CPHSPF)
- Prime Funders – U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), California Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development (GO-Biz)
- Announcement Type: Initial – Open
- RFQ Number: 2026-SBDC-03
- Closing date for submissions: Applications are due by 5 PM PT on September 3, 2026.
- Contracts vary in size from \$5,000 to \$250,000
- This RFQ does not constitute a contract.
- Current employees of a California State University (CSU) campus or Auxiliary are not eligible to apply.

- Counseling and training services are provided both in person and remotely. Applicants are not required to reside in the region where services will be provided.

Section 2. Program Evolution

Beginning January 2027, the Northern California Small Business Development Center program (NorCal SBDC) will implement a revised service delivery model designed to meet the evolving demands of entrepreneurs and small business owners. Upcoming changes described below and throughout this document are in response to a number of economic factors, and aim to make NorCal SBDC a more sustainable and impactful program.

Through a combination of regional coordination, expanded neighborhood-based access points, and streamlined administrative support, NorCal SBDC aims to make it easier for businesses to connect with the right advisor, receive timely assistance, and access the full range of resources available throughout the network. At the same time, local communities will continue to benefit from dedicated support tailored to their unique economic and entrepreneurial needs.

The changes described below are intended to strengthen service delivery, expand collaboration, improve operational efficiency, and strategically position NorCal SBDC to be relevant and effective for years to come.

Summary of Changes from Existing SBDC Infrastructure

Eight (8) SBDC Centers with Larger Territories	Each SBDC Center will oversee all SBDC services conducted within one of eight multi-county areas. A separate RFP process to host an SBDC multi-county Area is underway. Please see RFP NO. 2026-SBDC-01 for additional details.
Introduction of SBDC Neighborhood Branches	20+/- Neighborhood Branches will exist throughout the 36-county area, and report into the eight SBDC Centers. Each Neighborhood Branch will focus specifically on services to one city or community grouping. A separate RFP process to host an SBDC Neighborhood Branch is underway. Please see RFP NO. 2026-SBDC-02 for additional details.
All Fiscal Hosting by Cal Poly Humboldt Sponsored Programs Foundation (CPHSPF)	CPHSPF will be responsible for all budgeting, accounting, and will take on the burden of full cashflow needs for all SBDC programming. Local hosts will not be responsible for accounting, fiscal reporting, or fiscal reviews/audits.

All Business Advisors Contracted through CPHSPF	All business advisors in the NorCal SBDC program will become contractors of CPHSPF. The contracted business advisors will be located throughout the 36-county region. The eight SBDC Centers will oversee the advisors.
All Key Staff Employed by CPHSPF	Each of the eight centers will have a locally-stationed Area Director and Associate Director, and there will be a pool of Program Assistants to coordinate activities in each area. All of these positions will be employed by CPHSPF, and all employees will report directly to the Lead Center of the NorCal SBDC.
Increased focus on Innovation, Technology and AI	NorCal SBDC will move towards offering tech and innovation assistance throughout the network– not solely from the Tech Futures Group SBDC. Each NorCal SBDC Center will actively make connections with incubators, accelerators and other technology-focused organizations. NorCal SBDC will continue and increase integration of artificial intelligence (AI) as a topic of business assistance, as well as increase utilization of AI for network efficiency in operations.

Section 3. Background Information

1. NorCal SBDC Territory

The NorCal SBDC Network is the collaborative partnership between the SBA, GO-Biz and CPHSPF, supporting businesses in the northernmost 36 counties in California, stretching from Santa Cruz to Crescent City, and from Stockton to Alturas, including the San Francisco Bay Area, Silicon Valley, and the Sacramento metro region. The NorCal SBDC Network provides technical services (advising and training) to existing and emerging small businesses with a focus on growth industries in the region.

The administrative headquarters for NorCal SBDC is called the Lead Center. The Lead Center is the entity that is engaged via a Cooperative Agreement with the SBA, and via contract with GO-Biz to administer the network. The Lead Center for the NorCal SBDC Network is hosted by the Sponsored Programs Foundation of California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt, the northernmost university in the CSU system. The offices of the NorCal SBDC Lead Center are located in Arcata, California, and Kristin Johnson is the Northern CA SBDC Executive Director.

2. SBDC Services & Focus

Per its mandate, the SBDC program is designed to provide high-quality business and economic development assistance to small businesses and entrepreneurs to promote

business start-up, growth, expansion, innovation, profitability, management improvement, and job creation. SBDCs provide high-quality assistance to small businesses in complex areas that require specialized expertise. These areas may include, but are not limited to: management, marketing, financing, accounting, strategic planning, regulation and taxation, capital formation, venture capital, procurement, human resource management, production, operations, economic and business data analysis, engineering, technology transfer, innovation and research, artificial intelligence (AI) integration, new product development or commercialization, product analysis, plant layout and design, agriculture, business law and referral, exporting, office automation, site selection, or any other areas of assistance required to promote small business growth, expansion and productivity. In addition to advising, the NorCal SBDC Network provides training, conducts special events, and provides business-specific research and referral services.

A core differentiator between the SBDC and other federal, state, and local business assistance programs is the SBDC's focus on economic results (quantifiable successes) produced by its services. All SBDC advising aims at creating measurable outcomes with each client business, including: business startups, increases in sales, obtaining loan financing or equity investment (capital infusion), job creation and job retention. Annually, more than 40% of NorCal SBDC business clients should achieve one of these measurable results.

Applicants should note that the SBDC is not a social, entitlement, or workforce development program. The Network's business model is to serve small business owners and entrepreneurs. **Training of employees (workforce) is not an eligible activity of the program. Training of nonprofits is also not an eligible activity of the program.**

SBDCs serve both startup and existing businesses. **The primary focus of the NorCal SBDC Network is on existing (in business) companies.** Sixty-five percent (65%) of all clients receiving services from the NorCal SBDC are small businesses that are beyond the startup phase of operations and are specifically looking for help growing their enterprises and responding to challenges and opportunities in their industries.

3. Authorizing Legislation and Funding Sources

The SBDC Program is authorized through Congress and partially funded by the U.S. SBA and by GO-Biz. The NorCal SBDC is governed by Section 21 of the Small Business Act (15 U.S.C. § 648), federal regulations 13 C.F.R. Part 130, and California Government Code Section 12100-12100.69. Although the Lead Center is responsible for the general management and oversight of the NorCal SBDC program, a partnership exists between SBA, GO-Biz, the Lead Center, and the local host partners for the delivery of assistance to the small business community in the region. SBDCs, under Section 21 of the Small Business Act (15 U.S.C. § 648), are required to provide advising and training to small businesses, including working with the SBA to develop and provide informational tools to support business start-ups and existing business expansion. In addition, pursuant to 13 CFR Part 130.330(c), SBA may, from time to time, identify certain Special Emphasis Initiatives to be targeted for assistance by SBDCs. The NorCal SBDC Network maintains a strong working relationship with the SBA

District Offices located in San Francisco and Sacramento, California.

All SBDC services are provided pursuant to the NorCal SBDC Network Cooperative Agreement with the U.S. SBA; Federal OMB circulars; U.S. SBA Guidelines and Regulations; Grant Agreements between GO-Biz and CPHSPF; and the CPHSPF Policy and Procedures Manual.

Section 4. Business Advisor Opportunity & Desired Qualifications

1. Opportunity Overview

Being a NorCal SBDC Business Advisor is more than providing consulting services. Our advisors build lasting relationships with entrepreneurs through confidential advising, practical expertise, and objective guidance.

Advisors work with businesses at every stage—from startup through expansion, financing, hiring, technology adoption, exporting, acquisitions, and succession planning.

2. Scope of Services

As a NorCal SBDC Business Advisor, you will have the opportunity to:

- Deliver high-quality, confidential one-on-one business advising.
- Develop and present workshops, webinars, and educational programs.
- Generate measurable economic impact, including capital infusion, sales growth, job creation, and business starts.
- Represent the NorCal SBDC Network professionally throughout the region.
- Support regional and statewide initiatives.

3. Desired Experience & Qualifications

We seek contract advisors who combine technical expertise with strong communication skills, professionalism, and a genuine commitment to helping entrepreneurs succeed. We are building a diverse network of highly qualified subject matter experts with demonstrated success helping businesses achieve measurable results. Areas of expertise include:

- Accounting and bookkeeping systems
- AI integration and operational automation
- Business startup and general business planning
- Business succession and exit planning
- Business valuation, mergers and acquisitions
- Construction
- Cyber security and risk mitigation
- Export logistics and international trade
- Financial analysis and cashflow planning
- Government contracting and procurement
- HR, payroll and labor compliance
- Intellectual property filings and protection
- Loan package preparation
- Manufacturing and supply chain logistics
- Real Estate (Commercial)
- Social media and marketing
- Technology, SaaS and Software architecture

- Venture and angel capital preparation

We highly encourage applications from multilingual professionals who can serve the diverse business communities throughout Northern California.

Section 5. Application & Selection Process

1. Apply to Become a Contract Business Advisor

All applications must be completed and submitted through the StartUpTree portal:

<https://norcalsbdc.startuptree.org/competitions/8>

The application portal will open on July 24, 2026, at 12:00 AM PDT and will close at **5:00 PM PDT on September 3, 2026**. Late submissions will not be accepted.

Applicants must first create a StartUpTree user account to access the application. Once logged in, complete all required questions and upload all requested documents through the StartUpTree portal.

2. Selection Process

Admission to the NorCal SBDC Business Advisor Network is competitive. Applications are evaluated based on professional experience, subject matter expertise, demonstrated client outcomes, communication skills, past performance, references, and alignment with the mission and strategic priorities of the NorCal SBDC Network.

As part of the selection process, CPHSPF reserves the right to conduct interviews, request additional information or supporting documentation, or request clarification regarding any portion of an application.

Selected applicants will be notified upon completion of the selection process, on or before October 15, 2026. Contract start dates will be staggered between October 1, 2026, and January 1, 2027.

Selection as a Contract Business Advisor does not guarantee a minimum number of client assignments or a specific workload. Business Advisor assignments will vary based on program needs, funding availability, areas of expertise, and regional demand.

3. Independent Business Requirements

Applicants selected to move forward must demonstrate eligibility to serve as independent contractors through the Cal Poly Humboldt Sponsored Programs Foundation (CPHSPF). To comply with California Assembly Bill 5 (AB5), applicants must demonstrate that they maintain an independently established business offering professional services to the public.

Acceptable documentation may include:

- Business license (where required)
- Articles of Incorporation or LLC documentation (if applicable)

If your jurisdiction does not require a business license, alternative documentation may be submitted, such as a business website, business card, marketing materials, or client invoice/proposal.