

Small Biz Hype Squad/Little Tokyo Service Center

L.A. Conservancy Award....April 2024

Under the auspices of a social service and community development organization, this Little Tokyo squad is a pioneering example of how community-driven initiatives can preserve legacy businesses and nurture cultural vibrancy in a historic neighborhood.

Downtown L.A.'s Little Tokyo is one of the three remaining JapanTowns in the country, and in 2025, it will celebrate its 100th anniversary. While this is a milestone to celebrate, the reality is that the number of Japanese American residents within the neighborhood's official borders has dwindled to just a few hundred owing to factors like gentrification and the ever-looming threat of redevelopment.

During the pandemic, all small businesses struggled to pivot, but in particular, bootstrapped legacy businesses owned by limited-technology proficient Japanese immigrants faced more challenges in communicating their constantly changing hours and circumstances with their community in our commercial corridors.

Enter the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) and its "Small Biz Hype Squad."

In 2020, as part of the LTSC's COVID-19 response, LTSC's Small Business Program worked in partnership with the Little Tokyo Community Council and "Go Little Tokyo" to recruit a network of over 100 volunteers to support small businesses collectively. For 16 months, these volunteers delivered meals prepared by Little Tokyo legacy business to fixed-income seniors, created online visibility through social media accounts and websites, and interviewed small business owners about their storefront's history to complete detailed narrative requirements on small business grant applications.

The "Small Biz Hype Squad" started as an emergency response program to address the early challenges and needs of the height of the pandemic and has since been adapted to meet the needs of the changing landscape that continues to impact small businesses. The Small Business (Biz) Hype Squad began as a technical assistance program and evolved into a community engagement initiative.

The Small Biz Hype Squad is divided into four tracks to connect community members with legacy small businesses through thoughtful and curated engagement opportunities, educational programming, and community activations. The signature program, formerly called Small Biz Hype Squad and now renamed the Little Tokyo Ambassadors, pairs community members with legacy small businesses in Little Tokyo for 3-6 months to complete market research and design marketing campaigns that share their rich histories with the community and drive business into the local economy.

Since its launch, this program has supported over a dozen legacy businesses. One hundred volunteers and 15 legacy businesses have received education and grassroots training around historical and cultural preservation for Little Tokyo. They are also

executing projects that reflect that education for consumption by the greater Los Angeles community and beyond. Volunteers transformed into Little Tokyo small business advocates continue strengthening the community after their volunteering commitment ends.

This program is a model for historic neighborhoods to support the community cornerstones with people-power and resources that support sustainability in their business models and nurture long-term relationships with their community members.