

Aspire Challenge Proposal: *New Brand, New You*

Organization: Urban Strategies, Inc.

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Organizational Background

Urban Strategies is a leader in the field of community development, supporting more than 25,000 low- to moderate-income families, approximately 100,000 individuals, in 18 communities in 11 major metropolitan areas. We routinely partner with property management companies and real estate developers to allow a focus on place-based human capital development in conjunction with physical revitalization efforts. As a result of our alliance with housing developers, we build long-term relationships with residents which permits our ability to innovatively and effectively serve a traditionally underserved population with multiple barriers to employment and economic opportunity. Through our housing partners, we gain access to sustainable operating capital with which we fund resident services, support schools and youth development programs and incubate neighborhood-based entrepreneurial ideas.

For the Aspire Challenge, we will serve the Near North Side in St. Louis City. The Near North Side (NNS) sits in the 63106 zip code, the poorest zip code in the City of St. Louis. NNS has experienced a similar fate as other urban core communities around the country that have suffered from decades of disinvestment and population loss. Preservation Square Neighborhood (PS) is located within this footprint where we find the median household income is \$10,428. Among the 59% of PS residents who are unemployed, 36.7% have been unemployed for more than 5 years, and a quarter have a medical condition that prevents them from working. When asked what the greatest barrier in the neighborhood is to successful employment, 50% of residents believed their criminal record was the greatest barrier. Through our proposed “New Brand, New You” program, Urban Strategies will support ex-offenders from Preservation Square and the surrounding community in accessing capital to pursue entrepreneurial efforts. The program will benefit from being implemented in a region that is frequently referred to as a premiere start-up environment in the country. Home to a wealth of civic-minded corporations, venture capitalists networks, business incubators with legal and management supports and start-up competitions, St. Louis’ entrepreneurial ecosystem has the capacity and will to support small business development by ex-offenders living in Preservation Square and the Near North Side.

Management Team Bio:

Isaac Dozier, Regional Vice President and Western Operations Director

Mr. Dozier is based out of the Urban Strategies St. Louis office while also working closely with the San Francisco office. With over 13 years of experience in Human Capital Development and social services delivery, he has worked on three Choice Neighborhood and five HOPE VI projects. His experience includes working for both public and private agencies to develop a sustainable service delivery infrastructure for public housing communities undergoing physical revitalization. He specializes in supportive services strategic planning, community engagement, resident capacity building, and relocation support. Mr. Dozier was deeply involved with the development of a social enterprise run by juvenile ex-offenders in San Francisco. As well as spearheaded the Juvenile Reentry Assistance Program (JRAP), an initiative that partnered with the New Orleans Housing Authority and Southeast Louisiana Legal Services. Currently, Mr. Dozier oversees the implementation of the recently awarded Choice grant in St. Louis.

Dara Eskridge, Senior Project Manager of Choice Neighborhood Implementation

Ms. Eskridge leads neighborhood development for Urban Strategies’ St. Louis operations. In this capacity, she guides policy, partnership and programming opportunities to connect residents to regional opportunities through physical place-making strategies as well as broader service delivery and community-level capacity building with initiatives like the Byrne Criminal Justice grant. With nearly a decade in regional planning, her experience includes working with multiple HUD Continuum of Care, employment and training agencies, housing entities and local governments to transition homeless persons—including ex-offenders—into stable housing with wrap-around services and remove their barriers to meaningful employment.

Entrepreneurial Education Delivery Solution

Participant Recruitment:

Based on both existing and emerging relationships, outreach and recruitment for the New Brand, New You initiative will occur through three channels.

1. **Ongoing direct case management with Preservation Square households** provides automatic access to understanding the backgrounds and needs of the residents. As a result, Urban Strategies case managers and community liaisons already have relationships with ex-offenders living in the Near North Side. This direct connection to previously incarcerated adults allows Urban Strategies to better identify and support those who desire to start and grow their own enterprises. Through monthly community meetings already occurring in NNS and case management sessions, support specialists and community liaisons will publicize the opportunity to residents and conduct ongoing recruitment.
2. **Referrals from employment, training and supportive service partners currently working with NNS residents** will be sought to boost participation in *New Brand, New You*. To date, Urban Strategies has established a relationship with the St. Louis Agency on Training and Employment (SLATE), the WIA entity for the City of St. Louis and a primary partner for the local Byrne Criminal Justice Initiative. *New Brand, New You* staff will work with SLATE to identify NNS residents already registered for assistance with the agency and with a criminal background to conduct directed recruitment through SLATE's employment and support specialists. Similar recruitment will occur through Urban's relationship with the Fathers Support Center— an organization committed to strengthening families by connecting fathers, some of whom are ex-offenders, to economic, legal and social supports and opportunities.
3. **An emerging collaboration with the Missouri Department of Corrections and the Division of Offender Rehabilitative Services** will aid *New Brand, New You* staff in identifying persons released on parole or probation within the Near North Side for recruitment to the program. Additionally, DoC staff will be asked to refer inmates scheduled for release who indicate an address within the NNS footprint to *New Brand, New You*. Following the referral, program staff will meet with inmates and their supervising officer to determine interest in becoming an entrepreneur and growing a business enterprise once released.

Outreach will also consist of recurring workshops in the Near North Side that initiate the process of building interest and forming ideas for a new business. By using multiple channels for recruitment we hope to maximize participation in the *New Brand, New You* program.

Classroom Instruction:

New Brand, New You will introduce a new cohort twice a year in the spring and fall to engage in intense foundational skill building and business development planning. With the many organizations in the St. Louis area that provide entrepreneurship education, we will leverage existing relationships through CHOICE with organizations to provide entrepreneur education, financial literacy, and credit building strategies. The entrepreneurship curriculum will include an initial assessment which will place the individual on either the Technical Skill Building tract or the Business Ready tract.

The **Technical Skill Building tract** consists of the following:

- Job readiness training provided by local partner Employment Connection, focused on the evidence based practice of building world of work skills
- Adult education provided through Urban's certified GED program, operating out of Jefferson Elementary School located in the Near North Side which also has an online presence through the free Khan Academy platform

- Hard skills training in and exposure to the regionally high demand industries of child care, health care and manufacturing provided by Harris-Stowe State University, St. Louis Community College, and SLATE in early child care, health care, and manufacturing

By leveraging these community partners' commitments, we are able to provide ex-offenders enrolled in the *New Brand, New You* program with extensive classroom instruction and skills development based on their individual interests, all of which will aid in providing participants with the highest likelihood of economic success.

Individuals in the Technical skill building tract will also meet collectively once a week to discuss individual goals and assess the challenges and solutions to achieve those goals. Gradually, these once a week meetings will include interactive workshops on business plan ideation and development to prepare participants to move to the Business ready tract upon completion.

The **Business Ready tract** consists of the following:

- The Women's Business Center through Grace Hill Settlement House will provide their intensive mini-MBA course focusing on business development, management, financing and marketing
- the Small Business Empowerment Center's (SBEC) North City Community & Business Center will provide access to capital and business coaching, starting-a-business workshops, business planning services, growth strategies and mentoring
- With guided completion of a business plan, mandatory participation in the local Arch Grants small business plan competition

Upon completion of the introductory classes offered by the aforementioned community partners, participants will have the option to take more advanced business classes offered through SLATE, which address topics around marketing, contracting and human resources. Specific courses include:

- Bonding for small business construction entities and contractors
- Handling of Employment Contracts
- Intellectual property
- Third Party Contracts and Commercial Leases
- Legal Clinic

In addition to the entrepreneurship curriculum offered through our community partners, we will convene the participants of the Business Ready tract will visit the network of business incubators around St. Louis, starting with the regional economic development agency's STL VentureWorks sites. There, participants will have an opportunity to present their business ideas and gain feedback and guidance from a mix of professionals and up and coming entrepreneurs in the field.

Mentoring

Business Ready tract participants will be paired with Enterprise Coaches, small business owners who have sustained operations at least three years and have experience with the region's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Coaches will be recruited from Accelerate St. Louis, a primary convener of start-ups, venture capitalists and public-private partnerships investing in the growth of small businesses in the region. Coaching relationships will be encouraged through the end of the program and at least one year following completion.

In addition to business mentorship, all participants will be offered Urban's case management services. We will apply the proven Developmental Assets Framework to engage adults in connecting rigorous family assessment activities to goal-setting activities in order to describe a flexible but time-sensitive roadmap towards their personal and family-related aspirations. Based on an in-depth assessment of family strengths, housing and other

socioeconomic risks, all PS adults will have the opportunity to work closely with a culturally competent, trained and skilled Urban social work professional (i.e., case manager) to develop resident-directed Individual Development Plans (IDPs). Risk factors that are assessed and addressed by the IDP include but are not limited to: risk of eviction; risk of unemployment; household instability; risk of incarceration; health or mental health risks; and risk of being disconnected from school, job or caring adult (for children and youth). The IDP will identify specific entrepreneurial goals in addition to employment, education and health goals and the related supportive service needs. With the consent of the participating adult, the case manager will have sole responsibility for managing the IDP by providing or connecting the resident with supportive services related to their stated IDP goals, coordinating with the relevant referral partners, problem solving with residents, and tracking the outcome of the services provided for or connected to the resident. Responsibilities for service connection, coordination, problem solving and tracking outcomes will be negotiated and delineated clearly between resident and case manager on a case-by-case basis. The frequency and intensity of case management services will vary for each individual depending on the assessed level of housing and socioeconomic risks. The ultimate purpose of case management service is to reduce risk levels and support participant throughout the process.

Community Connections

Through the Choice Neighborhood Implementation grant to transform the Near North Side, Urban has gained immense support from organization. To further leverage these commitments, Urban will seek additional partnerships to increase referrals from diverse programs that support individuals in reentry and with organizations that can provide specialized trainings/courses specific to the interests of the participants. New partnerships include: The Father Support Center, Cortex Innovation District, St. Louis Enterprise Centers, STL VentureWorks, Venture Cafe and T-Rex business incubator.

Current Service Providers and Roles:

- Urban will coordinate the Workforce Program and ongoing mentoring
- SLATE is the local WIA and will provide hard skills training and wrap around services
- Employment Connection will provide job readiness and world of work skills training
- Small Business Enterprise Center will provide technical assistance to small businesses
- Prosperity Connection will provide financial empowerment services
- Ranken Tech, Harris-Stowe, Flance Center and St. Louis Community College will provide skills training
- St. Louis Regional Unbanked Task Force will provide financial empowerment services
- Justine Petersen will provide micro loans and small business technical assistance

Access to Capital

Urban Strategies will link participants to capital through the aforementioned partnership with Justine Petersen, a small business lending and financial literacy and advocacy organization. Justine Petersen will provide loans for business and commercial purposes with a separate loan product for general contractors as well as credit building services to assist micro and contractor loan recipients. Additionally, through the Financial Empowerment Center at the Prosperity Connection Excel Center in the Near North Side community, participants will receive counseling on critical strategies such as significantly increasing their credit scores through debt reduction, credit repair and savings; identifying new sources of income such as unclaimed benefits; and one-on-one financial counseling, focused on realizing the economic goals of participants and their families.

Monthly exposure start-up activities and networking opportunities in the region will connect participants with local lenders, investors and business pitch events to ensure participants are integrated and acknowledged in the greater entrepreneurial ecosystem in St. Louis.