

## Contestant Capacity

The Impact Empowerment Group (IEG) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to working with Northeast Denver's at-risk youth, gang affiliated populations, and formerly incarcerated individuals. IEG's geographical focus areas are in the Park Hill, Five Points, Clayton, and Montbello neighborhoods. In a community needs assessment conducted in collaboration with the Gang Reduction Initiative of Denver (GRID), the results showed that the NE neighborhoods have the highest rates of violent crime, gang activity, and recidivism in Denver County. In particular, NE Denver's formerly incarcerated population face a multitude of barriers to accessing opportunities for employment and economic self-sufficiency. Employers and businesses are reluctant to hire and employ ex-offenders due to the stigma and stereotypes associated with ex-offender's lack of job and people skills. Additionally, the state of Colorado has a total of 97 regulations restricting employment for people with a felony conviction. All of these compounded factors render it almost impossible for ex-offenders to obtain employment options outside of factory or fast food work, and prevents them from earning a livable wage.

IEG has a longstanding history and commitment to the NE community that spans a decade working with non-violent ex-offenders. IEG's success is rooted in its involvement and critical insights into the community, as well as experienced management and strategic partnerships with community stakeholders. IEG's mission is to strengthen and build community by equipping and empowering high-risk population groups with the skills and resources they need to succeed. The organization was originally established to address violence and gang activity in NE Denver through intervention and community mobilization. In 2014 Haroun Cowans took the position of Executive Director after serving as the board chair. Under his leadership IEG expanded its focus area and services to incorporate his true passion for transforming the community through entrepreneurship and economic development.

IEG's executive leadership and Board of Directors is comprised of entrepreneurs and financial and banking experts: IEG's Chief Operations Officer has over 12 years experience in the banking industry and specializes in small business development, and the board chair is an adjunct professor at both the CSU School of Global Business and Johnston and Wales School of Business. IEG recognizes that the best way to reduce recidivism and elevate the socio-economic status of people living in their community is through the provision of employment, entrepreneur, and financial management programs and services. Out of this understanding the *Entrepreneurship in the Neighborhood* program was developed. Created, managed and overseen by Haroun Cowans, the mission of the program is to provide formerly incarcerated individuals with an interest in entrepreneurship and business with the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to succeed in the business sector. IEG's vision is to create transformational outcomes in NE Denver by providing formerly incarcerated individuals with access to entrepreneurial and micro-finance opportunities so that they may create their own success and achieve economic stability.

IEG currently delivers high-quality entrepreneurship, job development, and social-enterprise programming through a collective impact network of service providers in the community. NE Denver is primed for entrepreneurship opportunities and creates new jobs in a community that has been lagging behind in employment in comparison to the surrounding areas in Metro Denver experiencing rapid and robust economic growth. Complimentary supportive services provided by IEG to participants are mental health counseling and individual case management to ensure long-term, holistic, and sustainable success for every person.

A Colorado native who grew up in NE Denver, Haroun came to IEG with more than 15 years of experience in the banking and finance industry. He is an entrepreneur and owns several small businesses. Haroun brings with him prior experience working with formerly incarcerated individuals, as well as a large network of local business owners, financial institutions, and support from district councilmen. Haroun Cowans, Executive Director of the Impact Empowerment Group, can be reached at his email [haroun.cowans@gmail.com](mailto:haroun.cowans@gmail.com), or at his direct cell phone 720-394-2341.

## Entrepreneurial Education Delivery Solution

IEG's staff members, known as Community Outreach Specialists (COS), recruit the majority of participants in the *Entrepreneurship in the Neighborhood* program. IEG's Community Outreach Specialists are unique because they are ex-offenders and formerly incarcerated individuals from NE Denver who have successfully graduated from IEG's economic empowerment programs, making them great advocates and role models. The COS's work within the NE Denver community to recruit program participants through outreach efforts targeting gang members and formerly incarcerated individuals. They have a strong rapport and high level of trust in this complex and hard to reach population. IEG also contracts with their partner GRID who provides IEG with referrals for individuals residing in half way houses, in the probation system, and reporting to the district police department. IEG is currently in the beginning stages of developing a formalized partnership with the Department of Justice to create a direct referral service pipeline to their programming upon an individual's release from prison.

*Entrepreneurship in the Neighborhood* is a fully designed six-week curriculum for formerly incarcerated individuals with an aptitude for entrepreneurship and a desire to start their own business. Participants are provided with the understanding, skills, and resources necessary to determine the viability of an idea with the goal to create a business plan to launch their own business. The course is delivered through six weekly in-person classroom sessions, and cover all components from product development and costing, market price research, branding, customer development and retention, vehicles for profitably delivering a product or service to market, legal compliance, and strategic planning and ultimate execution. Upon satisfactory completion of this course, participants have the ability to:

- Understand how an idea for a product or business fills the needs or responds to the wants of a target customer segment;
- Reasonably estimate the cost of delivering a product or service to its intended customers as well as the price that can be obtained in the market;
- Understand how to develop and retain customers by locating customers who share the business's value proposition;
- Communicate with those customers through branding, advertising and other means of promotion;
- Appreciate the network of people and resources necessary to run a business and the importance of developing successful relationships with partners, employees, retail outlets, suppliers and other supporting interests such as bookkeepers, bankers, and landlords;
- Determine how best to protect a business by operating through a proper entity, ensuring licensure, tax and regulatory compliance, and by taking appropriate advantage of government and community support and insurance;
- Identify key strategies necessary to ensure success in the near term and in the long term;
- Understand the importance and key elements of a business plan, including the financial aspects of the plan from start-up capital to an on-going operating plan;
- Develop a concrete execution plan with identifiable steps in order to in fact launch a business.

In addition to real world practical business skills and acumen, the course content includes life lessons that are true and applicable not just in running a successful business but in living a successful life. Participants learn about the importance of having integrity and personal values, how to build positive leadership skills, and building trust with others.

The program's cohort size is 10 individuals per course, and the program is taught four times per year. To encourage participation and increase value to the program, participants are paid a small stipend over the course of the six weeks. In the first week of the course each program participant creates an online account with Purpose Finder, a six-week purpose-driven coaching and motivational tool. Participants are guided through the

program as they learn how to assess their strengths and explore their true vision and purpose in life. By the end of the course, participants will have created a business related goal and a detailed plan of how they will reach that goal. Aside from the online Purpose Finder tool, classroom materials, additional resources, and website creation services will be made available for all participants on a secure cloud-based storage site.

The *Entrepreneurship in the Neighborhood* curriculum is taught by a combination of volunteers including business faculty from state universities and community business owners, all who have experience in developing, launching and running small businesses. Each participant is matched with a professional mentor who meets with them once a week and provides individualized support and guidance to develop their business plan and ultimately launch a business. Mentors work with their mentees to improve their interview skills, make introductions to potential clients and investors, and model the realities of being a small business owner. Mentors work intensively with their mentees to create a viable business plan with a plan for sustainability and potential to scale.

IEG is committed to addressing the immediate and long-term needs of the program participant, not just their economic well-being. Upon program enrollment all participants undergo an extensive intake process conducted by IEG staff. Participants fill out an intake form with information about their current housing situation, current or past gang affiliation, criminal background information, employment status, and substance abuse history. Dependent on their needs, IEG staff connects and refers participants to other resources and wrap around services they might need, including bus tickets and/or housing vouchers, substance abuse counseling, medical services, food pantries, and clothing exchange and tattoo removal programs. IEG has an extensive network of social service organizations they work with to ensure a returning citizen has all of their basic needs met.

Participants who successfully graduate from the *Entrepreneurship in the Neighborhood* program will receive a certificate of completion. Throughout the year IEG offers multiple continuing education opportunities, financial literacy classes, and networking events to its program participants. These components enable participants to improve upon and solidify their actionable business plans and to network with necessary resources who can provide support critical to launching a business including financing, space acquisition, legal assistance, and supplier networking. Participants will also continue to be engaged in wraparound social services, and once they have successfully launched their business, they will add to the number of local businesses who are connected to the economic empowerment programs offered by IEG.

## Access to Capital

The *Entrepreneurship in the Neighborhood* program's ultimate goal is to enable participants to launch a successful business upon graduation from the course. In order to launch their businesses, program participants need access to capital and investors. IEG has a partnership with the Colorado Enterprise Fund (CEF), a community development financial institution that provides loans and lines of credit to small businesses. CEF has expressed a strong desire to work with IEG's entrepreneurial program and to provide loans to leverage program costs. IEG works with CEF to connect qualifying program participants with Small Business Financing Loans ranging from \$2,000-\$20,000.

The Denver Metro area is currently experiencing robust growth and significant investment in the infrastructure and development sectors. IEG has relationships with more than five construction and HVAC companies who are interested in working with entrepreneur program participants and providing them with opportunities for small businesses such as flagging, green energy, large-scale construction, concrete work, and construction clean up.

IEG connects entrepreneur program participants to capital and funding opportunities by pairing each participant with an IEG staff member, known as a Community Navigator. The Community Navigator acts as an advisor and consultant to the participant, and helps them to gain access to the best types of capital to best fit their needs. IEG's Community Navigators possess in-depth knowledge of banking and finance and cash flow management, along with the capacity to advise participants through the phases business launch, from concept to execution of their venture. Community Navigators connect program participants to potential investors, register them for local business matchmaking events, and helps them refine their business pitches for lenders.

At this time IEG is researching potential warehouse or office space to act as a small business incubator. Participants who have successfully completed the entrepreneurship course will be given the opportunity to lease a space for their business in the small business incubator. Participants leasing a space in this location will be surrounded by other small business entrepreneurs and be given financing guidance, mentoring support, and space to run to their businesses. The small business incubator is complementary to the entrepreneurship program, and a shared space for successful participants to turn their business plans into reality.