

Aspire Challenge- Miles of Freedom

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Contestant Capacity

Organizational Background

Miles of Freedom (MOF) is a 501(c)(3) organization founded in 2012. The founder, Richard Miles, spent 15 years wrongfully incarcerated and after his full exoneration, established MOF. MOF's mission is to provide supportive services and assistance to individuals, families, and communities impacted by incarceration with the goal of reducing recidivism while strengthening the family and community. MOF serves Dallas, TX and surrounding areas, focusing primarily on southern Dallas. MOF is located in the Martin Luther King Community Center in the southern sector of Dallas, where the annual median household income is under \$26,000 (United States Census Bureau, 2017). This urban area has the highest concentrations of ex-offenders in the Dallas metroplex (Dallas Office of Economic Development (Dallas OED), 2008, Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, 2017).

MOF provides supportive services for formerly incarcerated persons and their families in several areas: pre-release, a job readiness workshop for individuals returning home, and a youth mentorship program. MOF job readiness workshops assist individuals returning from prison, or with felony backgrounds, to gain employment and become productive citizens. These workshops incorporate an integrative individual and ecological perspective essential to understanding issues specific to formerly incarcerated individuals. Workshops reduce the burden of criminal background and potential recidivism through the work of numerous individuals and organizations offering curriculum-based training on soft skills (professional work ethics), social skillsets, teambuilding, and financial literacy. Upon completion, members receive several benefits, including assistance with employment searches, job interviews, job placement, and 1-year wrap around services with individualized case management utilizing the strengths perspective. MOF job readiness workshops throughout the year for formerly incarcerated individuals put it in exceptional position to add entrepreneurial education as a featured module within its curriculum.

Background of Management Team

Richard Miles has traveled the nation with his story of faith and perseverance. While wrongfully incarcerated and against tremendous odds, he completed his GED and received an Associates Degree in Applied Science and several vocational certificates. He also received ordination as a minister by his father, Bishop Lloyd, in September of 2001. He is a frequent guest on numerous platforms in radio, television, and stage- speaking on such topics as wrongful incarceration, education, criminal justice reform and the prison pipeline. Additionally, Richard is called upon to present court testimony in trials as a prison expert witness, is recipient of the Miguel Hidalgo Award (2013) for the advancement of the community, TDJCID Chaplain Volunteer and DISD Volunteer.

Tahvia Merrill has experience supporting at risk families and communities living with the effects of violence and trauma. She has been involved with Children's Advocacy Centers in Collin, Dallas, and Rockwall counties. Her current focus is on her passion for working with ex-offenders, their families, and groups affected by urban poverty. She understands complex issues associated with re-entry and is working diligently to make a positive impact in this area. She is Program Director at MOF, with responsibilities including facilitation of job readiness workshops, intensive case management, program evaluation, and program development. Mrs. Merrill graduated summa cum laude from Texas A&M University Commerce with Bachelors and Masters degrees in Social Work. She is a member of the National Society for Leadership and Success as well as the National Association of Social Workers.

Entrepreneurial Education Delivery Solution

Participant Recruitment Plan

One of the most economically challenged areas of Dallas is the Fair Park area, where MOF is located (Dallas OED, 2008). Within this area, the median household income is significantly below state average, as is home value. The percentage of unemployed is above state average, and the population of African Americans residing in the area is significantly above state average (City-Data, 2016). Further, the number of residents with income below the poverty level within this community is 42% (City-Data, 2016). The southern Dallas community where MOF is located, the 75215 zip code, is not only one of the poorest zip codes in the county, but its ex-offender population is significantly higher than the state average (City-Data, 2016). Change is critical in this zip code, and MOF's location within this area is strategic to influencing significantly the community's troublesome conditions.

During 2016, MOF rendered service to over 400 individuals who came into the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center seeking employment in some capacity. Additionally, MOF actively recruits participants for its 12-week job readiness workshops through organizational participation in community coalitions and conferences, direct contact with area parole offices, recruitment of prior clients, and community outreach. All such individuals are potential participants for the entrepreneurial education program. While continuing to use our current proven methods to acquire and retain new clients, the addition of an entrepreneurial education module would enable MOF to target other client segments.

Classroom Instruction

Since 2013, MOF has successfully delivered at least two 12-week workshop cohorts annually, and, during 2017, MOF increased its schedule to include three such workshops. These workshops are structured in a face-to-face format, encouraging active participation from each member. Cohorts meet weekly for 4 hours and receive instruction from professionals in their field. Topics covered include leadership skills, professional work ethics, personal growth and development, financial literacy, teambuilding, and art therapy. Adding entrepreneurial education as a supplemental module at the end of the workshop day would effectively enable workshop attendees wanting to explore entrepreneurial education to remain for this entrepreneurial training. Potential entrepreneurs not attending the job readiness workshop would attend only the entrepreneurial component.

MOF submits the proposed plan for entrepreneurial education with intention of collaborating with the Fair Park District Entrepreneur Center (The District), a business incubator developed in partnership with the Dallas Entrepreneur Center. MOF will offer a robust introductory program, preparing participants for success by providing a solid instructional foundation and participant-vetting period. During the entrepreneurial module, professional volunteers supplied by the District will provide orientation and training on topics including the day in the life of an entrepreneur, strategy and finance, legal documents and contracts, customer service, marketing and development, leadership, and initiation of a business plan. Upon successful completion of this first stage, MOF will sponsor participants who advance to concentrated training by The District, utilizing Aspire Funds for this purpose.

Upon securing a sponsored membership to The District, participants will transition to the second phase of entrepreneurial training. Through a memorandum of understanding between The District and MOF, participants will have a MOF assigned representative, access to collaborative co-working space, intensive entrepreneurial guidance, business fundamentals, professional mentorship and whiteboard sessions, help completing a final business plan, guidance in securing capital or microloans, and individualized support. Upon successful completion of this phase, MOF will utilize Aspire funds to contribute to the participant an individually designated amount of financial capital to serve as launch funds or accelerating funds for their business.

Classroom Instruction, Cont'd

As a stipulation of receiving launch or accelerating funds from MOF, participants are required to sign an agreement with MOF. The contract with MOF requires the participant to commit to appropriate use of funds and agree to incremental follow-up assessments for the first year. Designated MOF representatives will perform three, six, and 12-month assessments of participant performance and business results with documented outcomes.

Mentoring

MOF mentoring will begin with the entrepreneurial module, as participants begin to engage and evaluate various components of the program and make decisions relative to potential entrepreneurial employment. The District mentoring will involve retired CEOs and business professionals who contribute time to brainstorming and white-boarding sessions, which provide opportunities for entrepreneurs to validate business ideas. Mentors from The District will also provide individual mentoring and coaching for developing business towards actual start up.

Community Connections

MOF recognizes that the success of this entrepreneurial program is heavily dependent upon MOF's existing relationships within the community and collaborative partnerships. The Martin Luther King Community Center is the established focal point in the southern sector of Dallas since 1975. Since MOF's partnership with the Martin Luther King Community Center is crucial in providing better support services to our current client base, it would be similarly instrumental in assisting with the entrepreneurial education program. MOF has also developed relationships with Frost Bank, One Man's Treasure, Texas Workforce Commission, Texas A&M Commerce, YMCA, United Way, State Fair of Texas, Habitat for Humanity, Zip Code Connection, and UNT Law School. Contributing to the empowerment of an entire community, and especially, formerly incarcerated individuals through an entrepreneurial education program could be precisely the tactic needed to reduce poverty and recidivism in this underserved area of Dallas.

Access to Capital

Access to Micro-lending

As a source of financial services for entrepreneurs and small businesses lacking access to traditional lenders and financial resources, an MOF volunteer and former vice president of AIG will utilize dedicated resources on a pro-bono basis to reach out to non-traditional capital sources. Representative of such sources is KIVA, a foundation that connects lenders to poor or impoverished entrepreneurs. Another key MOF volunteer is a recipient of a Small Business Administration loan with his partner, "Good Investments, Inc." whose work with local bankers will be valuable in gaining access to micro lenders. Illustrative of lenders whom MOF will contact at the appropriate time include LiftFund, a micro lender in business, specializing in loans to minorities and women in the USA, and Accion, a micro-lender specializing in impact investing, whose vision is to build a financially inclusive world.

Connection to Capital and Funding Opportunities

As detailed above, MOF would utilize some Aspire funds in the training program, in enabling participants to access concentrated training at The District, and as designated launch and accelerating funds. Should greater funding be required for launch and acceleration, The District identifies and matches potential financial and intellectual investors to support new start-ups and existing businesses. In addition, MOF includes a growing board and board advisors with solid backgrounds in business plan development, proposal writing, and presentations before corporate boards and banks. With board members from the local community whose professional network is substantial, successful participants would have access to a number of connections. MOF has the resources to gather necessary funding requirements and data, prepare necessary documentation, create necessary proposals and presentations, introduce foundation to significant lenders and funders in the North Texas area, conduct and/or attend matchmaking events, and leverage State and Local Government agencies involved with re-integration of offenders into society.

Participants in the MOF entrepreneurial program will find strong support and guidance among experienced advisors, professional partnerships, graduate level interns, influential volunteers, a diverse Board of Directors and along with the Program Director and Founder. MOF is positioned to identify properly the best participants and funders for this mission, prepare stellar presentations and applications, and support fledgling business ventures.

References

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