

## ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

The Cherokee Nation Small Business Assistance Center is highly interested in the Small Business Administration's Aspire Challenge. For more information about our Aspire Challenge proposal, please contact:

**Organization Name:** Cherokee Nation

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The Cherokee Nation is a leader in providing innovative and enriching entrepreneur training and assistance as well as access to lending capital to traditionally underserved populations within northeast Oklahoma. The Cherokee Nation Commerce Small Business Assistance Center's mission is to secure and enhance the financial well-being of Cherokee people, businesses, and communities. The SBAC accomplishes its mission by providing affordable access to consumer and commercial financing, facilitating entrepreneurial development through training and technical assistance, and promoting self-sufficiency through budget counseling and financial education to more than 131,288 Cherokee citizens who live within the Cherokee Nation's 14 county jurisdiction of northeast Oklahoma.

The Cherokee Nation is well versed in providing high impact capital and development services to low income disadvantaged Native Americans. The Cherokee Nation SBAC specializes in entrepreneurial and personal finance trainings and currently operates the Kawi Café Program, a hands-on entrepreneurial training ground for formerly incarcerated individuals. Identified needs of formerly incarcerated individuals in the region include employment opportunities, employment and training skills, work appropriate clothing, driver's license reinstatements, and housing assistance.

## BACKGROUND OF MANAGEMENT TEAM

The Cherokee Nation is led by a highly experienced and well-rounded management team.

Anna Knight, Commerce Services Executive Director, provides program design, program management, and will execute the challenge through oversight responsibility in an administrative role. Anna has over 25 years of experience in economic development, lending, management, program development, and working with Native Americans.

Shay Smith, SBAC Director, provides direct operational management and execution of the challenge. Shay has served Native Americans for 17 years, with experience including management of a savings program, entrepreneurial training programs, technical assistance, a housing program, and the successful hands-on entrepreneurial training center operation, the Kawi Café.

Stephen Highers, Entrepreneurial Development Manager, will provide oversight of training and staff supervision. He will oversee the challenge initiatives and facilitate the training between the Kawi Café and Re-entry programs. Stephen has 11 years of experience in mass communication, marketing, leadership, and public relations.

Daryl Legg, Re-Entry Program Director, has 11 years of experience in the employment and training field. He executes the goals of the Re-Entry Program ensuring program compliance and successful accomplishment of objectives.

## **ENTREPRENEURIAL EDUCATION DELIVERY SOLUTION**

The Cherokee Nation SBAC opened the Kawi Café in 2013 as the first of its kind innovative, hands-on entrepreneurial training program. The Kawi Café is staffed by one Business Coach and six participants at a time. Participants in the Kawi Café program work full time in the café for six months where they learn all aspects of owning and operating their own business. In addition to the hands-on training, participants receive classroom instruction over various topics on professional and personal development, one-on-one business coaching, and classroom style financial education and personal finance coaching.

The SBAC developed a partnership with the Cherokee Nation Career Services Reintegration (Re-Entry) Program in October 2016 to begin training formerly incarcerated individuals in the Kawi Café, as entrepreneurship is a viable avenue to self-sufficiency for these individuals. This partnership fulfills the missions of both the SBA and the Re-Entry Program by promoting entrepreneurship and helping empower formerly incarcerated individuals by providing a steady work history and the skills needed for successful integration.

### **Participant Recruitment Plan**

Participants will be identified through established program policy and procedures of the Cherokee Nation Career Services Reintegration (Re-Entry) Program. Those eligible to participate include, but are not limited to, Cherokee citizens with a felony without incarceration, or who have been released from prison within the previous three months, who reside within the jurisdiction of Cherokee Nation, not having a hold, warrant, or pending charge. Participants must submit to random drug testing, and follow required referrals to other programs such as Cherokee Nation Behavioral Health. The Re-Entry program maintains a steady pipeline of applicants due to Oklahoma's high rate of felony convictions; 1 of every 6 men and 1 of every 12 women are convicted felons.

Participants are recruited based on initial work and life skills development completed by Career Services. Career Services recommends individuals to the Kawi Café program who have self-identified as being interested in entrepreneurship.

### **Classroom Instruction**

Participants in the Kawi Café program receive a \$7.50 per hour stipend during the course of the program and work up to 40 hours per week. This 6 month time frame gives participants a stable work history needed to seek outside employment once they've completed the entrepreneur program. With this timeline we can have 2 cohorts of 4-6 participants working in the café and working with business coach in classroom and one-on-one training. Their work includes time in the Kawi Café tending to the business and classroom training. Financial education and entrepreneur classroom style trainings held on site. Classes involve individualized business coaching and personal finance assistance.

The Cherokee nation utilizes GrowthWheel as our entrepreneur training and business planning curriculum. This curriculum is designed to address the four common parts of business development that each builds upon the other: business concept, organization, customer relations, and operations. An SBAC Business Coach presents this curriculum in a traditional classroom style setting supplemented with the ability for participants to go online at [www.growthwheel.com](http://www.growthwheel.com) and dive deeper into each of the four parts' subsections. In addition to the classroom instruction, the Business Coach works one-on-one with each participant to determine that they understand the curriculum, answer questions that may be unique to their entrepreneurial goals, and help them build and complete a business plan needed to access lending capital.

In addition to the GrowthWheel curriculum, participants are offered professional and personal development opportunities related to adult basic education, life skills training, financial literacy programs, personal finance counseling, and access to affordable capital.

The entrepreneurial training program challenges participants to attend a minimum 120 hours of business planning, 40 hours of entrepreneurial coaching, and 20 hours of financial literacy coaching. Graduation is dependent upon the participant completing a business plan for a small business operation, displaying a willingness to commit the time necessary to establish and grow a small business and create employment opportunities for other formerly incarcerated individuals.

The Cherokee Nation Commerce Services and Career Services departments are dedicated to helping formerly incarcerated and felon entrepreneurs create viable businesses to increase their financial stability, reduce recidivism, diversify the local economy, create community based jobs, and enhance the overall entrepreneurial climate within our communities.

### **Mentoring**

One of the advantages of the partnership between the Kawi Café and Re-Entry programs is the presence of a coach up to 40 hours per week for the participants. The participants work with a Business Coach to develop on-the-job entrepreneurial skills, a financial coach to increase their financial stability, and a Re-Entry Counselor to ensure all conditions of release are being met. The Business Coach and Re-Entry Counselor work with the participant to connect them with job opportunities at the completion of the program and provide personal and employer references for the participants. The Re-Entry Counselor also connects the participants with transitional services such as housing assistance, nutrition assistance, clothing assistance, and driver's license reinstatement. SBAC and Re-Entry staff are readily available to assist participants on a daily basis, ensuring they have the support needed to successfully return to main stream society. Staff monitor participants' court date attendance, payment of fines, and ensure their holistic needs are being met.

### **Community Connections**

A unique aspect of this entrepreneur training experience is the connection with the Kawi Café. Participants are working day to day in the Café and are exposed to community members, local businesses and special events. The Cherokee Nation operates the Kawi Café like any other local business and the Café prides itself on being an active participant in the local chamber of commerce, main street programs and other community events such as: the Cherokee National Holiday, community parades, Northeastern State University homecoming events, Arts on the Avenue, and Tahlequah Main Street's annual events such as Wines on the Avenue. In addition to events, several organizations hold meetings at the training center wherein Re-Entry participants have the opportunity to learn about other services provided in Tahlequah.

The Business Coach, Re-Entry Counselor, and Financial Coach all work individually with the program participants to ensure they maximize available resources. Each staff member utilizes their expertise and resource connections to help participants capitalize on opportunities and other programs that will improve the returning citizens' chances of success. Basic services provided to all Re-Entry participants include nutrition, housing, and clothing assistance. After basic needs are met, staff utilizes departments within Cherokee Nation and local organizations to address more individualized needs.

## **ACCESS TO CAPITAL**

### **Access to Micro-Lending**

The Cherokee Nation Economic Development Trust Authority (CNEDTA), established in 1989, is a tribally chartered nonprofit corporation. In 1998, the CNEDTA became a certified Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) and carries out its work utilizing the staff and resources of Cherokee Nation's Small Business Assistance Center. Cherokee Nation Economic Development Trust Authority offers low interest commercial and consumer lending products to low income individuals to open or expand a business within the 14 counties of the Cherokee Nation. The lack of financial knowledge and a shortage of mainstream financial institutions in the rural areas of northeast Oklahoma make entrepreneurialism seem out of reach for many Native Americans. CNEDTA has made great strides to address this need over the past 6 years, providing \$6.5 million in business loans to entrepreneurs and thereby creating or retaining nearly 1,000 jobs. The connection between CNEDTA and SBAC provides Re-Entry participants with direct, easy, and affordable access to capital.

### **Connection to Capital and Funding Opportunities**

The SBAC is a one stop center for individuals interested in starting a new business or expanding a business. The SBAC provides one-on-one coaching, business plan analysis and development, and commercial lending for Native American citizens, in addition to networking opportunities such as an annual Certified Indian Owned Business fair for business to business networking, Regional Summits, and entrepreneurial classes held throughout the 14 counties of northeast Oklahoma.

Kawi Café and Re-Entry participants work with the Business Coach to prepare a complete business plan and, if necessary, a funding application, to request loan funds to start a business. The Business Coach will be the connection between the Re-Entry participant and the loan staff, providing moral support and technical assistance. The Cherokee Nation also partners with local banking institutions when needed to provide resources and prepare an individual for business operation.

The Cherokee Nation Small Business Assistance Center is uniquely positioned to deliver maximum impact with an SBA Aspire Challenge award. The SBAC has an innovative training system in place to benefit formerly incarcerated citizens which includes employment, entrepreneurial development services, financial education, access to capital, and assistance with basic needs including housing, nutrition, and clothing. Although the Business Coach is in place at this time, funding for the Coach ends at the close of the fiscal year, bringing an end to the Kawi Café's partnership with the Re-Entry Program as there will be no means in place to sustain the Kawi Café operations. The SBAC will use Aspire Challenge funds to pay the salary and related costs of a full time business coach whose sole priority will be to work with the Kawi Café and Re-Entry program participants to continue carrying out the services detailed in this application.