

Contestant Capacity

Organizational Background: The City of Bridgeport is a diverse urban center located in Southeastern Connecticut. With 147,000 residents, Bridgeport is the state's most populous city. Demographically, it is also among the poorest. Bridgeport residents, on the whole, are younger, have completed less education, and are impacted by poverty in greater numbers than their suburban neighbors. A once booming industrial center located along the Long Island Sound, Bridgeport suffered hardship after many of its waterfront factories shuttered; however, recent redevelopment including the revitalization of waterfronts and historic neighborhoods has helped the city to flourish.

Approximately 10,000 formerly incarcerated offenders are residents of Bridgeport. Upon release, these citizens are too often unaware of the employment, mental health, education, housing, and other services available to support their return to the community. In response to this problem, the City created the Mayor's Initiative for Reentry Affairs (MIRA) in August 2016. Led by Program Coordinator Louis Reed, MIRA seeks to ensure that individuals are put on a path to successful citizenship by providing direct support services to formerly incarcerated residents and currently incarcerated persons scheduled to be released to Bridgeport. Services include distribution of resource packets, basic needs assessments, promoting access to employment and educational opportunities, and referrals to community service providers for those in need of more in depth support. In addition, MIRA works to bring together re-entry/second chance service providers across Bridgeport to ensure coordination and collaboration that will benefit Bridgeport's returning citizens. Through these services, MIRA plays a vital role in creating a strong framework to reduce recidivism for Bridgeport's returning citizens. Since its inception six months ago, MIRA has engaged approximately 155 individuals and continues regular follow up with approximately 25 residents per month. MIRA will provide significant high-level support for the City's Aspire Challenge activities.

The City's Small and Minority Business Resource Office (SMBRO) will direct Aspire Challenge activities. SMBRO is dedicated to providing the resources and information small, minority, and women-owned businesses need to start local businesses compete for business opportunities with the City of Bridgeport. The Office oversees several small business development programs for Bridgeport residents including: Business Essentials 101 workshops for new and existing businesses; a "Get Your Business Online" program designed to increase the web presence of local companies; retail business development programs; and procurement technical assistance involving bid matching services for federal, state, and local government contract opportunities. In addition, the Office oversees the organization of local business expos, career fairs, and panel discussions for local residents, business owners, and entrepreneurs. Further, the Office's established relationships with reputable local lenders provide access to capital to the Bridgeport entrepreneur community. Fred Gee, SMBRO Program Coordinator, will serve as the primary project contact. He can be reached at 203-576-8473 or fred.gee@bridgeportct.gov.

Background of Management Team: The Aspire Challenge activities will be managed by Fred Gee, SMBRO Program Coordinator and Louis Reed, MIRA Program Coordinator. Mr. Gee is a community leader with extensive experience in community organizing. Mr. Gee is also a Bridgeport-based small business owner who has himself been through the process of developing, organizing, and operating a successful, local janitorial business. Mr. Reed is a clinical alcohol and addictions practitioner with specialization in life coaching and reentry management and is the founder and Chief Visionary Officer of the Louis L. Reed Empowerment Group. Mr. Reed is no stranger to the barriers related to ex-offenders reentering society. He spent time in federal prison before returning to Connecticut and starting a successful business enterprise.

Entrepreneurial Education Delivery Solution

Recruitment: Bridgeport's Aspire Challenge will strive to reach a diverse group of motivated returning citizens who are interested in exploring business ownership and pursuing business formation as a self-employment tool. Participants will be identified and recruited by the MIRA program through its ongoing outreach to formerly incarcerated community members and incarcerated individuals with an upcoming release date. MIRA will develop Aspire Challenge promotional flyers and brochures as well as include the workshop as a part of its Bridgeport service directory. MIRA and SMBRO staff will make presentations at local community services organizations to advertise the program to their formerly incarcerated clients and actively recruit participants.

MIRA has the unique ability to provide outreach directly to incarcerated individuals approximately 90 days prior to their release date in addition to formerly incarcerated individuals living in the Bridgeport community. During the outreach process, MIRA conducts a needs assessment that includes vocational skills, educational achievements, goals, criminal history, health needs, and interest in participating in life skills or other training. This assessment will be used to identify individuals who are interested in pursuing business formation and ownership as a means of self-employment and economic mobility. Follow up calls will ensure that all eligible program participants are aware of Aspire Challenge opportunities.

Classroom Instruction: Aspire Challenge activities will be open to formerly incarcerated individuals or those who are non-violent ex-offenders with priority given to Bridgeport residents. An application process will be developed to select interested, committed individuals for each Challenge cohort. Challenge workshops will be offered to two cohorts of 20-25 individuals each in fall 2017 and early spring 2018. Each eight week session will meet twice a week for one three-hour in-person session and one virtual session. Virtual sessions will occur via Facebook Live, Web X, or another online platform. The City of Bridgeport computer training center will be open for use by participants that may not have access to a personal computer or necessary software.

The City's Aspire Challenge activities will use the Entrepreneur in the Classroom curriculum model developed by the National Federation of Independent Business as well as a Business 101 Curriculum currently in use by the City's SMBRO. The nationally recognized Entrepreneur in the Classroom curriculum provides a comprehensive introduction to entrepreneurship and business planning topics. Through participation in these workshops, participants will learn valuable communication, leadership, creativity, problem solving, and organizational planning skills. Elements of the Entrepreneur in the Classroom curriculum, with a focus on the concepts and ideas behind entrepreneurship will be ideal for a reentry population that has not had the opportunity to be exposed to business development learning. Introductory materials will pave the way for the more traditional concepts to be put into use during the Business 101 phase of the training. In addition, the training will address topics specific to the reentry population including a discussion of how criminal history may affect legal eligibility for formation of certain types of businesses.

The workshop introduction will include a self-assessment that will allow participants to explore their personal entrepreneurial interests and career visions. Subsequent workshops will grow in complexity while encouraging participants to explore their skills, goals, and passions. Introductory workshops will focus on key topics like financial literacy, business strategy, accounting principles, leadership, marketing, and business financing. As workshops advance, discussion will focus on health insurance, voluntary benefits, human resources, liability, contracting and market/product development, technology, social media and online marketing, and establishing a business plan.

To ensure that participants have access to the essential resources to succeed, SMBRO and MIRA will partner with representatives from local agencies to make presentations throughout the duration of the in-classroom training. For example, People's United Bank will present on key topics like financial literacy, leadership skills, and business financing. Local business owners including WC McBride Electrical Contractors and Corvus Capital Partners LLC will speak on contracting and market/product development. Mr. Gee will assist all workshop participants with developing individualized business plans as well as working to ensure that their credit scores are healthy enough for potential loans. Workshop materials will be supplemented with online resources including readings and video lectures from Stanford University's *Entrepreneurship Corner* and the U.S. Small Business Administration's *Encore Entrepreneurs* among other resources that delve deeper into the topics addressed during in-person or online sessions. A Bridgeport Aspire Challenge Facebook page will be developed so that participants can retrieve readings and keep in contact with Aspire leadership and each other. In addition, classroom style learning will be complemented by various activities. These will include field trips to local small business outlets, like Bridgeport's Tiny Home Builders, which constructs prefab small homes called nanopods. Challenge participants will get to see firsthand a local business that was built from the ground up and interact directly with local entrepreneurs. In addition, toward the end of the program, Aspire leadership will conduct a mock business pitch event/ mock loan interview with representatives from local banks and lending institutions.

The Aspire Challenge workshops will give each participating business the fundamentals that they need to successfully achieve their short-term and long-term objectives, goals, and outcomes. All participants will complete workshops having prepared necessary documentation to secure funding and with the experience and confidence to pitch their business to prospective funders.

Mentoring: Individualized support will be made available to all program participants throughout the duration of the Aspire program. Mr. Reed and Mr. Gee will schedule regular individual meetings with program participants to discuss topics of interest and address any specific needs. In addition, a representative from People's United Bank and local business owners like Willie McBride of WC McBride Electrical Contractors and Gary Flocco of Corvus Capital Partners LLC will volunteer their experience and expertise to support individual participants. Using its existing local small business network, SMBRO and MIRA will work to ensure that all participants are matched with a local business owner in their field of interest.

Community Connections: In addition to mentoring provided by local business owners, Aspire Challenge participants will have the opportunity to connect with the local business community through an area business summit organized by SMBRO. Further, Aspire participants will be able to participate in the regular business expos, career fairs, and panel discussions organized by SMBRO. MIRA will use its ongoing collaborative work with social service providers to ensure that all program participants are connected to providers that can address financial literacy or other needs.

Access to Capital

The City sees the Aspire Challenge as a gateway to investing in the potential of its returning citizens. Therefore, the Aspire Challenge activities will ensure that participants have the resources necessary to prepare them to fund their business ventures. Following workshop participation, SMBRO staff will remain available to all program participants to provide assistance with preparing proper documentation for meetings with potential funders. In addition, ongoing SMBRO services specific to various business types (i.e. retail development, bid matching services, etc.) will be available to all participants as they seek to implement their business plans.

SMBRO will work closely with the SBA to link participants with microlenders who will assist them with funding or growing their business. In addition, SMBRO has strong ties to nearby lenders eager to invest in local business enterprises including: the Community Economic Development Fund in Meriden, CT; Liquid Capital Corporation in White Plains, NY; Greenwich Bank and Trust in Greenwich, CT; and local branches of Key Bank. Using these existing relationships, SMBRO will connect program participants with reputable, local banks or lending institutions that may be able to provide flexible, affordable loans to potential business owners. These lenders have agreed to waive processing fees and prioritize lending to small Bridgeport-based businesses. Matchmaking and/or business pitch events with local lenders and investors are organized by SMBRO quarterly and will provide Aspire participants with opportunities for securing investment. Mock pitch events conducted during the workshop process will prepare Aspire entrepreneurs for these events. Quarterly events will ensure that all participants are able to join events when they are fully prepared to take the final steps to business creation.

As an incentive for completing the Aspire Challenge workshops, the City will plan to set aside a portion of its award dollars to provide small grants to committed participants ready to begin the process of business formation. These grants may cover business registration fees, certifications, or other start-up related costs.

In addition, SMBRO is working to develop credit services to small businesses and entrepreneurs who are unable to access loans from commercial sources. In the future, these programs may be available to help businesses purchase assets, working capital and/or closing costs for real estate acquisitions.

The City of Bridgeport is committed to connecting its returning citizens to business development opportunities as a means of self-employment and economic mobility. The City's unique support network will ensure that returning citizens not only have access to vital social services, but that they are able to take advantage of innovative educational opportunities that will open doors to business ventures that they may never have thought possible. Ongoing mentoring and support through MIRA and SMBRO will ensure that Aspire Challenge participants have the tools necessary for successful business development and additional support services available through SMBRO will provide long-term assistance as they implement their business plans and grow their business.