**Organizational Background**

**Organization:**Harlem Commonwealth Council (HCC), 361 West 125th Street, NY, NY 10027

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Harlem Commonwealth Council (HCC) has been an ongoing presence in the communities of Upper Manhattan and the South Bronx since 1967. Originally capitalized by the federal government under the Great Society Legislation, HCC was founded to stabilize Harlem, and its neighboring communities, after years of poverty and blight resulted in significant community distress. Initially, HCC achieved its mission through the acquisition and redevelopment of real property. Through these efforts, the organization was able to transform numerous abandoned properties into thriving small business centers. Today, HCC directs its energy towards the creation of economic opportunities for small businesses so that they may continue to create meaningful employment opportunities for community residents there by addressing income inequality and the racial wealth gap.

The communities that HCC serves have some of the highest rates of incarceration in the nation. According to the DATA2GO.NYC (a comprehensive, searchable online database for NYC statistics) South Bronx neighborhoods have the highest rates of incarceration in all of NYC, with Upper Manhattan neighborhoods, like East Harlem, following right behind. Each year, HCC reaches thousands of businesses, and individuals interested in starting businesses, from these communities. We offer a comprehensive array of programs designed to facilitate small business growth. Several HCC programs are particularly relevant to the Aspire Challenge: 1) the Arches Transformative Mentoring Program, and the Next Steps Program 2) the Harlem Entrepreneurial Fund (HEF), and 3) the NYC Business Solutions Center. The Arches and Next Steps Programs deliver an extensive curriculum-based mentorship program to court-involved youth. Program staff take great pride in their proven ability to provide participants with a second chance for a promising future. Harlem Commonwealth Council manages these programs by ensuring that key entrepreneurial resources are available to business through each stage of engagement in our programs. In FY 2016, HCC served over 2,300 businesses. More than 1,600 of those businesses that came through HCC’s programs were equipped with the skills and knowledge through educational workshops and courses. Through its lending activities, the organization provided access to over 44.3MM in capital to over 140 minority firms during last fiscal year.

**The Financial Clinic: HCC’s Collaborative Partner for the Aspire Challenge**

In order to amplify HCC’s existing service offerings and to provide a robust solution to the program participants, HCC will be enlisting the aid of a trusted partner in the field: The Financial Clinic. This highly acclaimed nonprofit organization builds working poor families’ and individuals’ financial security by addressing their immediate financial challenges and helping them set long-term goals to achieve financial mobility. Headquartered in New York City, the Financial Clinic has worked with hundreds of individuals and families in the very same neighborhoods served by HCC. The Clinic’s Financial Coaches conduct financial literacy and planning workshops to help working poor individuals and families address immediate concerns. They also provide one-to-one coaching, conduct complete financial status assessments, and develop concrete plans with clients to help them on the path towards a more financially secure future. Using the Clinic’s key outcome areas—Assets, Banking, Debt, Credit, Taxes, and Goals—Financial Coaches use customized online tools to help customers create their own trajectories, thus empowering them to take charge of the process. The Clinic also has extensive experience providing financial literacy and planning services to formerly incarcerated individuals.

**Background of Management Team**

Kelvin Collins is the President and CEO of HCC, oversees all of HCC programs, services, and operations. Prior to joining HCC in November of 2015, Mr. Collins was Assistant Commissioner at the NYC Department of Small Business Services overseeing programs that supported more than 10,000 NYC small businesses and startups each year. HCC will also leverage its Director of Lending, Lloyd Doaman, as the key connection between the SBA Aspire program and access to capital services. Mr. Doaman manages the Harlem Entrepreneurial Fund and his background includes 6 years in financial services. Finally, Danielle Douglas, Certified FastTrac instructor has more than a decade's experience training both new and seasoned entrepreneurs of all levels in both classroom instruction and one on one settings. Ms. Douglas will conduct both classroom instruction and provide one to one business coaching to SBA Aspire program participants. Harlem Commonwealth Council’s strong management team will immediately engage in the SBA Aspire program to ensure a quick start and smooth transition into services.

**II. Participant Recruitment Plan**

HCC’s first step towards a comprehensive recruitment strategy will be to brand our new Entrepreneurship Re-Entry Program ***“RE:Launch NYC***” as a unique resource for those involved in the justice system who are now looking to explore and launch their own business ventures. This initial program brand will be followed by a series of mass marketing strategies, coupled with more targeted efforts, that will ensure a high level of interest in the community.

Targeted Outreach to Past Participants from HCC’s Arches and Next Steps Programs: HCC has administered the Arches Transformational Mentoring Program for the past five years, and we have also managed the Next Steps Program for the past two years. These programs provide in-depth mentoring and coaching services to formerly incarcerated youth ages 18 - 24. Although similar in terms of services, the Arches Program may only take referrals from the Department of Probation, while the Next Steps Program is open to individuals in the 10027 zip code (Harlem), with a special focus on the St. Nicholas Housing Project. To date, close to 160 individuals have been served by these two initiatives. As such, HCC has a sizeable, pre-established cohort of individuals, drawn from two different channels, who might benefit from our proposed solution. In light of the above, HCC intends to combine a mass e-blast and mail campaign to our entire past cohort, with a call drive to select past participants. Calls will be conducted by the HCC program managers and line staffers who can draw on their solid rapport with past program participants. These staffers will select candidates for calls based on their highly informed assessment of a candidate’s abilities and interests. We anticipate that running the two approaches concurrently will uncover multiple individuals who would benefit from our proposed solution.

Reaching Out to Mentors from HCC’s Arches and Next Steps Programs: In addition to past program participants, HCC will target the Arches/Next Steps mentors themselves for participation in our program. The vast majority of our Arches and Next Steps mentors are peer counselors who were themselves incarcerated at some point in their lives. HCC’s mentors are typically older, by at least five years, than our past program participants, and they often have more extensive workforce and life experiences. In general, these are strong self-starters who would be prime candidates for an entrepreneurship program. HCC maintains a database of all current and prior mentors and our Program Director for the Arches and Next Steps Programs will handle all direct outreach to this group.

Working with a Local Network of CBO’s who Provide Services to Formerly Incarcerated Individuals: The Arches and Next Steps programs are run by multiple CBO’s across the city who specialize in serving formerly incarcerated populations. HCC attends monthly learning community meetings alongside all of these providers to share best practices and lessons learned, and our staff enjoys a cordial and collegial relationship with all of these CBO’s. Should HCC be selected by the SBA, we intend to leverage these relationships to help spread the word about our program. We will work directly with all Arches and Next Steps providers, in Upper Manhattan and the S. Bronx, to identify current and past participants form their programs who would benefit from HCC’s proposed initiative. We would then look to the opinions and guidance of these organizations’ case managers, counselors and program directors when selecting participants from their cohorts.

Leveraging pre-existing Relationships with the Manhattan DA’s Office, Probation and Parole: Each month, HCC, via a partnership with the Manhattan DA’s Office, conducts in-person outreach to individuals probation and parole; we typically see 25 individuals per session. If selected for the Aspire Challenge, HCC will introduce the new program to these groups as well.

Additional Outreach via the Financial Clinic’s Database: The Financial Clinic, HCC’s strategic partner for the Aspire Challenge Initiative, has a database of current and past participants and their intake form delineates whether an applicant has a prior history of incarceration. In similar fashion to our work with other CBO’s, HCC will look to the Financial Clinic’s Program staff to make referrals and recommendations for entry into our program.

**Classroom Instruction**

The process of launching a business is rigorous and advanced, and, in order to ensure program success, HCC will need to be highly selective when enrolling applicants. To this end, HCC will administer an in-depth intake and application process to identify qualified participants. Screening and eligibility questions will be crafted to determine an applicant’s ability to commit to the program, willingness to comply with rigorous program standards, and motivation to pursue their own business ventures. After HCC’s outreach and screening efforts have identified 30 individuals for enrollment, we will then assign all participants into one of two cohorts of 15 participants each. This 1:15 teacher-to-student ratio will help to ensure that all our students receive a high depth of service and support throughout their time in the program.

HCC’s classroom series will be anchored by a proven curriculum: the FastTrac New Venture Program. This curriculum was developed by the Kauffman Foundation, and has been actively utilized nationwide for more than 20 years. In NYC, FastTrac New Venture is currently utilized by the NYC Department of Small Business Services as the backbone for its entrepreneurial training series in partnership with the NYC Public Library System. In line with the FastTrac model, HCC’s classroom instruction will be provided over a series of 10 weeks, with each session lasting approximately 4 hours. Session topics will develop progressively over the term allowing participants to refine their ideas in a systematic and purposeful manner. Session topics include: market identification, aligning business models with market demands, financial goal setting, defining competitive advantages, branding and, finally, completion of a business plan. In addition, HCC will leverage existing learning tools from the SBA Learning Center in the classroom sessions. Such tools will include SizeUp, Build Your Business Plan, etc.

HCC will also be integrating experiential learning experiences into the traditional FastTrac curriculum as we have found that experiential learning modalities are often the most successful ways to engage with justice-involved populations. One such experience that will be weaved into our curriculum model will be a field trip to a business where participants can see firsthand how a small firm manages the multiple challenges and processes that take place in a given day. HCC will recruit business partners via our Business Solutions Center which serves hundreds of small local firms each year. In addition, HCC’s collaborative partner, the Financial Clinic, will deliver 5 financial literacy and planning workshops to ensure that all participating individuals have their own personal financial houses in order prior to embarking on any business ventures. These five workshops will be integrated with our FastTrac sessions allowing participants to gain a holistic perspective on how personal financial responsibility and successful entrepreneurship intertwine. Coaches from the Financial Clinic will also be available to program participants for one-on-one coaching sessions and these coaches will interact with HCC’s team to ensure a seamless coordination of services. At the end to the experience participants will all have a completed business plan and working knowledge of operating a business.

**Community Connections**

Harlem Commonwealth Council will leverage its broad range of community connections to ensure that all aspects of services are available to the Aspire program participants. In addition to the aforementioned connections, resources, and services, HCC will ensure rapid access to service providers to enhance the overall experience and impact during and post-program.

While HCC maintains strong relationships with many community partners, we seek to support SBA Aspire participants with holistic services that address multiple needs. Community connections include Exodus Transitional Services, Children’s Village, Friends of Island Academy; all focused on support for re-entry services, The Financial Clinic (as noted) & Green Path Debt Solutions for services related to debt, credit, and money management, as well as access to pro-bono legal assistance to review non-litigating issues related to personal or business issues. Referrals to community partners will be tracked for the cohort participants to ensure adequate service needs are being met.

**III. Mentoring**

Mentorship is one of HCC’s primary organizational goals and we encourage this activity throughout all of our program offerings. Over the years, we have developed a deep and longstanding partnership with the NYS Business Mentorship Program, as well as SCORE. We will draw heavily on these resources for the proposed program, and we will seek to pair our program participants up with experienced entrepreneurs who can lend an objective, and experienced voice to their development. We anticipate that mentors will touch on a host of topics with program participants ranging from business planning, to financing to product development.

HCC will also integrate mentoring into every aspect of our classroom learning experience. Our instructor will serve as a mentor to students outside of classroom hours, and will hold designated office hours to connect with students and to offer more in-depth coaching whenever necessary.

Finally, HCC’s business solutions staff, who is charged with providing technical assistance to hundreds of businesses each year, often engages in informal mentoring and coaching activities as well. HCC is fortunate to have these professionals at our disposal and we will utilize their knowledge and expertise wherever possible to help guide our program’s participants to success.

**IV. Access to Capital**

HCC runs a, U.S. Treasury Certified, Community Development Financial Institution, known as the Harlem Entrepreneurship Fund (HEF). HCC’s Board founded HEF in 2008 as a micro-loan program for small and minority and women-owned businesses. Since then, HEF has been active in developing and disbursing small loans to local business owners and budding entrepreneurs who are interested in starting or expanding their businesses. During the economic downturn of 2009, HEF functioned as a critical community resource for local small businesses who had substantial difficulties in accessing capital as traditional lenders retreated from what they deemed to be riskier small business markets. Through HEF, businesses are able to receive, through multiple interactions, the resources they need – not only to capitalize their businesses, but to remain sound and sure of the financial implications of their businesses choices. Every loan applicant receives direct guidance in preparing their financial statements, understanding and addressing their credit and credit scores, guidance in developing their financial tool kit, and input on the use and potential impact of their loans and extensions of credit.

In addition to our in-house CDFI, HCC maintains connections to a host of nontraditional and commercial lenders through our NYC Business Solutions Center. The Center has made referrals to multiple lending providers including Accion NY, Project Enterprise, Business Center for New Americans, Business Outreach Center Capital, among others, including SBA program lenders. The combination of its CDFI program, and direct lines to both traditional and non-traditional lenders ensures multiple access points to finance for a wide variety of businesses at all stages.