

2026 Dream Accelerator Program

Official Application Instructions & Program Details

Last Updated: March 11, 2026



Overview

The District of Columbia (“DC” or the “District”) Department of Small and Local Business Development (“DSLBD”) is excited to announce that we will begin accepting applications for the **2026 Dream Accelerator Program** (the “Program”), a cohort-based training for microbusinesses, starting March 23, 2026 at 2:00 pm Eastern Time (“ET”).

Eligible microbusinesses must have **fewer than five employees**, the business must be **located in Ward 7 or 8**, and the applicant business owner must be a **Ward 7 or 8 resident owning 51% or more** of the business. *This Program is only for for-profit businesses.*

Applicants accepted into this 6-8-week competitive program will receive help growing their businesses and becoming sustainable. Program participants will receive business development training on several topics from local service providers, including:

- Core Business Foundations
- Marketing & Branding
- Financial Management
- Operations & Sustainable Growth
- Using Artificial Intelligence in Business

Participants who complete the Dream Accelerator Program will be eligible to compete in the **Dream Pitch Competition**. The Dream Pitch Competition is an opportunity for participants to pitch their businesses to a panel of judges, showcasing the knowledge gained through the Program, resulting in a pitch award between **\$2,000 and \$7,500**.



Program Eligibility

Applicants for the 2026 Dream Accelerator Program must meet the following criteria:

- The applicant must be a Ward 7 or 8 resident;
- The applicant must be the majority business owner (owning 51% or more of the business);
- The business must be located in Ward 7 or 8;
- The business must be a for-profit business;
- The business must have fewer than five (5) full-time employees;
- The applicant must not be a recipient of a previous Dream or We Aspire cohort program pitch award.

Multiple participants per business are not accepted. Selected participants may only participate in one DSLBD Cohort Program within the fiscal year.

How to Apply

DSLBD will begin accepting applications for the Dream Accelerator Program on March 23, 2026. **Submit your application here:** <https://des.dslbd.dc.gov/>.

All applications and supporting documents must be submitted using the online application system. Incomplete applications and those submitted after the deadline will not be reviewed. Applications that do not meet the eligibility requirements listed in this document will not receive a competitive review.

Application Deadlines

Applications must be submitted by **April 23, 2026 at 2:00 pm ET. No Exceptions.**

There are other deadlines that applicants should monitor.

Program Application Deadlines

1 st COURTESY ELIGIBILITY REVIEW	2ND COURTESY ELIGIBILITY REVIEW	QUESTIONS	FINAL
MARCH 31	APRIL 13	APRIL 16	APRIL 23 at 2:00pm ET

Courtesy Eligibility Review: DSLBD will provide a courtesy review for applicants who start applications by or before the courtesy eligibility review deadlines. During this review, DSLBD staff will review and provide feedback on the responses to eligibility requirements only. If the application does not meet the eligibility requirements, DSLBD will notify the applicant of non-compliance issues. The Applicant may use DSLBD’s feedback to resolve non-compliance issues and submit by April 23, 2026 at 2:00 pm ET.

DSLBD will conduct courtesy eligibility reviews on a rolling basis. DSLBD will not provide feedback on the applicant's competitive responses.

Application Information Sessions

Information Sessions: DSLBD will offer multiple application information sessions (virtual and in-person) to support applicants in understanding these Official Application Instructions and provide an opportunity to ask questions live. Register for an information session here: <https://www.eventbrite.com/o/departments-of-small-local-business-development-7956762164>

Questions: All questions must be asked by the question deadline, April 16, 2026, to receive a guaranteed answer. Questions asked after the deadline cannot be guaranteed a response prior to the application deadline. All questions must be emailed to inno.ed@dc.gov or asked during an Information Session. **No phone calls will be accepted.**

Required Eligibility Documents

Program-eligible microbusinesses must have **fewer than five (5) employees**, the business must be **located in Ward 7 or 8**, and the **applicant must be a Ward 7 or 8 resident owning 51% or more of the business**. Required eligibility documents must be submitted using the online application system.

Required documentation will demonstrate:

- Identity of the majority business owner
- Proof of residency in Ward 7 or 8
- Proof of business location in Ward 7 or 8
- Proof of applicant’s majority ownership
- Business size of less than five (5) employees
- Proof of active business license (for licensed businesses)

All information, documents, and attestations must be submitted in the online application system in the eligibility section for review. Applicants who do not meet eligibility requirements will not be evaluated. Only one application is allowed per applicant.

Applications can be saved in the online system, allowing applicants to return and make edits before final submission. False information may result in Program forfeiture.

Use the checklist below to ensure that you have all the required information, documents, and completed attestations prior to submitting an application.

REQUIRED ITEMS		
	LICENSED BUSINESS	NOT YET LICENSED
Photo ID	✓	✓
Proof of Residency	✓	✓
Proof of Majority Ownership	✓	✗
Employment Identification Number (EIN)	✓	✓
Valid DC Business License	✓	✗
REQUIRED ATTESTATIONS		
Business Bank Account Attestation	✓	✓
Business Size Attestation	✓	✓
Majority Ownership Ward 7 or 8 Resident Attestation	✗	✓
Allowable Use of Pitch Award Funds Attestation	✓	✓

View all requirements for your business at the time of application. If you have any questions, please email Inno.ED@dc.gov or register for an information session.

Learn more about each required item below:

Valid Photo ID	
DESCRIPTION	Valid photo ID for the majority owner/applicant.
APPROVED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● DC issued Driver's License, OR● DC issued Non-Driver Identification Card, OR● Passport.
NOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● ID must be active and not expired.● ID from states other than DC are not accepted.

Proof of Ward 7 or 8 Residency	
DESCRIPTION	Documentation to prove applicant's residency in Ward 7 or Ward 8.
APPROVED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Utility bill, OR● Bank statement, OR● Paystub, OR● Formal government letter verifying residency.
NOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Document must be dated within 90 days of April 23, 2026.● Deed, Lease Agreement, and Water Bill are not accepted documents.● The applicant majority business owner's name and address, and the document date must appear on the document.● Use the Master Address Repository system to verify the address ward location https://developers.data.dc.gov/marviewer/home.

Valid DC Business License

DESCRIPTION	PDF of the Business License issued by the DC Department of Licensing and Consumer Protection (“DLCP”) or appropriate licensing authority.
APPROVED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Basic Business License (“BBL”), OR● Professional Business License, OR● Alternative Business License (if applicable).
NOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Must be searchable in the DLCP Business License database if a BBL, OR must submit a copy of professional or alternative licensure.● License must be in active status.● If a BBL is not required for the business type, DSLBD will verify that a BBL is not required by DCLP.● Address on the business license must be located in Ward 7 or 8.● This requirement is for licensed businesses only.

Proof of Majority Ownership

DESCRIPTION	Document that displays the identity of the majority owner of the business entity.
APPROVED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Articles of Incorporation, OR● Operating Agreement, OR● Trade name registration (sole-proprietor).
NOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● The owner’s information must be visible.● Must have an Articles of Organization file number. <p>This requirement is for licensed businesses only.</p>

Employee Identification Number (EIN)

DESCRIPTION	An EIN, also known as a Federal Tax Identification Number, is used to identify a business entity.
APPROVED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Enter the EIN in the system,● Upload a copy of the EIN certificate,
NOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Available for free at www.irs.gov● If Sole Proprietor, please provide the social security number of the majority owner

Business Bank Account Attestation

DESCRIPTION	Attestation within the online system that applicant has an open business bank account for the applicant's business.
APPROVED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Acknowledge the statement in the system by entering the applicant's full name.
NOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● No uploads required.● Applicants shown to have falsely attested may forfeit participation in the Program.

Business Size Attestation

DESCRIPTION	Attestation within the online system that the applicant's business has less than five (5) full-time employees (FTE).
APPROVED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Acknowledge the statement in the system by entering applicant's full name.
NOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● No uploads required.● Applicants shown to have falsely attested may forfeit participation in the Program.

Majority Ownership Attestation

DESCRIPTION	Attestation within the online system about majority ownership of the business.
APPROVED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Acknowledge the statement in the system by entering applicant's full name.
NOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● No uploads required.● Applicants shown to have falsely attested may forfeit participation in the Program.

Allowable Use of Pitch Award Funds Attestation

DESCRIPTION	Attestation within the online system indicating the applicant will use the pitch award funds only for business related expenses as identified under the “Allowable Use of Pitch Award Funds” section.
APPROVED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Acknowledge the statement in the system by entering applicant’s full name.
NOTES	Applicant will create and submit a budget breakdown of business expenses to ensure these align with allowable uses of pitch award funds.

Selection Process

DSLBD will select Program participants through a competitive application process. A review panel consisting of DC Government employees and/or community partners will review all **ELIGIBLE** applications received by the submission deadline of **April 23, 2026 at 2:00 pm ET**.

The Program team will review the panel recommendations, and the Director of DSLBD will make the final determination of Program participants.

The following criteria will be used to evaluate all eligible applications:

- Participant benefits (25%)
- Business goals & potential growth (50%)
- Participant’s commitment to the business (25%)

Competitive Application Questions

The application is broken down into three (3) sections and corresponds directly to the scoring criteria listed in the *Selection Process* section.

Participant Benefits

1. Tell us about your business: what does your business do, how long have you owned it, and who runs it day to day?
2. Who are your customers? Describe the market for your goods and services.
3. What are the biggest challenges and needs of your business right now, and how will this Program help you overcome them?
4. Why do you want to participate in this Program?

Business Goals & Growth Potential

1. What is your dream for your business? (Your vision for your business in the next year or beyond)
2. How do you plan to create awareness of, and promote your business?

3. If you received the top pitch award of \$7,500, how would you use the funds to grow your business?

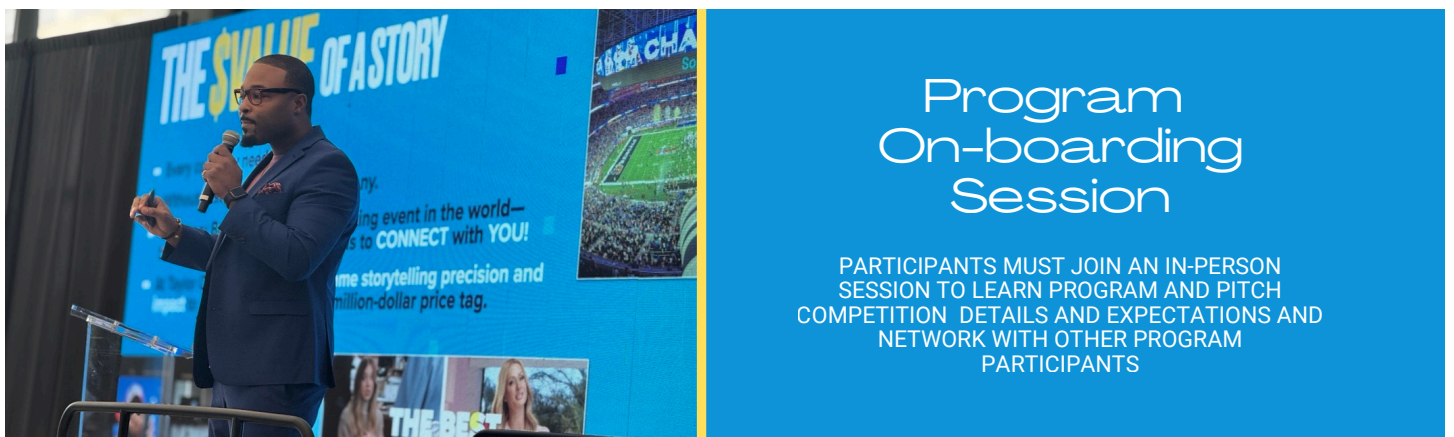
Participant Commitment to the Business

1. Tell us the “why” behind your business. How did your business come to be?
2. What preparation went into starting your business?
3. How have you utilized marketing & branding, financial management, and mentorship support in your business to date?

Program Acceptance Details

Notification of selected Program participants will be made two (2) weeks to one (1) month prior to the Program’s start date. Selected Program participants will be required to attend the following before participating in the Program:

- Program on-boarding session: participants must join an in-person session to learn Program and Pitch Competition details and expectations, and to network with other Program participants.



All selected Program participants, in addition to attending the Program on-boarding session, must do the following to continue in the Program and participate in the Dream Pitch Competition:

- ***Maintain active participation and an attendance rate of at least 85% in the full 6-8-week Program.*** Participants are required to attend all weekly training sessions. The Program is a hybrid model; some sessions will be virtual, and others will be in-person. Absences must be pre-approved. Barring emergencies, participants must contact the designated attendance manager in advance and notify the manager of an upcoming absence. An 85% attendance rate of required activities is required to remain in the Program, participate in the Dream Pitch Competition, and receive a pitch award. No Exceptions.
- ***Attend Pitch Prep Sessions.*** Pitch prep sessions will be available to support participants in preparing for the Dream Pitch Competition, including pitch run through and slide deck development sessions. Participants must attend at least one pitch prep session.

Dream Pitch Competition

The Dream Pitch Competition (the “Pitch Competition”) is an opportunity for eligible Program participants to pitch their businesses to a panel of judges, which may include business owners, and representatives from financial institutions and community-based organizations (“CBO”), and showcase the knowledge gained through the Program. Participation in the Pitch Competition will result in a pitch award between **\$2,000 and \$7,500**. Participants will prepare a pitch deck and will have 5 minutes to pitch to the panel of judges, who will evaluate the pitch on a scoring rubric and provide feedback.

Participating businesses will pitch against other participant businesses located in their respective ward. For example, if your business is located in Ward 8, you will participate in the competition against all Ward 8 participant businesses.

Participant businesses must meet the following requirements to be eligible to receive a pitch award:

- ***Pitch and participate in the Dream Pitch Competition.*** All participants must pitch in the competition for their respective ward.
- ***Have an active and valid business license.*** Participants will be required to submit proof of an active business license before the end of weekly Program sessions.
 - A participant business that is unable to submit proof by the deadline may be eligible for a pitch award if the business (1) maintains an 85% attendance rate and active participation in the Program; and (2) participates in the Pitch Competition. However, the business is **only eligible** for a pitch award of \$2,000 and is unable to participate in the Battle of the Wards Pitch Competition.

Any participating business that **does not participate** in the Pitch Competition is not eligible to receive a pitch award even if all other requirements are completed.

Battle of the Wards Pitch Competition

The Battle of the Wards Pitch Competition is an opportunity for the top performing businesses in each ward to battle it out to be crowned the top ward. The top 5-7 businesses with the highest performance in each ward in the Dream Pitch Competition will represent their ward in the Battle of the Wards Pitch Competition.



Restrictions on Allowable Uses of Pitch Award Funds

Pitch award funds cannot be used for the following purposes:

- Personal use (i.e., residential rent, mortgage, utilities, fuel, or mileage)
- Debt (i.e., pre-existing debt, financing, or paying off personal expenses or taxes)
- Personal entertainment (i.e., vacations, sporting events, concerts, restaurants, etc.)
- Any other use restriction, as determined by DSLBD, in its sole discretion

Allowable Uses of Pitch Award Funds

Pitch award funds must be used on business expenses, including but not limited to the following:

- Business rent or mortgage for a commercial space
- Office equipment (including home-based businesses)
- Employee wages or payroll
- Business insurance
- Business regulatory licenses and fees
- Business software and technology (i.e., a point of sale ("POS") system, subscription services, web hosting and design, etc.)
- Business utilities for a commercial space
- Business inventory (e.g., raw materials, cost of goods sold, packing materials, etc.)
- Any other expense deemed allowed, as determined by DSLBD, in its sole discretion

Program Impact Reporting

Dream Accelerator Program participants shall complete an impact report documenting the following:

- A description of the types of expenses Program funds were used for;
- An explanation of how Program funds helped the business operate, grow, and/or pivot; and
- Any additional reporting requirements requested by DSLBD.

Additional reporting requirements will be communicated by DSLBD through a Program Award Impact Reporting Acknowledgement form. The form will be provided by DSLBD to Program participants during scheduled class time.

Reservations

This section includes reservations that DSLBD makes in releasing application rules.

A. Contingent

1. Funding for any pitch awards is contingent on sufficient and continued funding for this Program. The Official Rules do not commit the Agency to make any funding awards.

B. Application Acceptance and Costs

1. Applications must be made through the online portal. DSLBD will not accept applications submitted via hand delivery, email, mail, or courier service. Only in extenuating circumstances will exceptions be considered.
2. Applications that do not comply with all instructions listed in the Official Application Instructions will not be reviewed.
3. DSLBD reserves the right to accept or deny any or all applications if DSLBD determines that it is in the best interest of the District to do so.
4. DSLBD reserves the right to suspend or terminate participation if information provided in eligibility documentation cannot be verified in a timely manner.
5. DSLBD may enter into negotiations with a Program participant and adopt revisions of the participant's application that may result from negotiations.
6. DSLBD shall not be liable for any cost incurred by an applicant in the preparation of one or more applications for this Program.
7. The applicant understands and agrees that all costs incurred in developing and preparing any application shall be the applicant's sole responsibility.

C. Ownership of Content

1. Applicants participating in the Dream Accelerator Program accept that all class sessions, pitch competitions, and pitch practices will be photographed and video recorded and consent to be photographed and/or recorded. If a participant does not wish to be photographed or recorded, he/she/they must inform DSLBD at the start of the Program.

2. DSLBD is considered the owner of any content developed for technical assistance purposes and paid through an award. As such, DSLBD may retain and reuse written or recorded materials and concepts at a future time.

D. Accessibility

1. Attendees of a Program-related business event may request language access accommodations when registering for the event. Requests for language and American Sign Language (“ASL”) interpretation must be forwarded immediately to a DSLBD staff member involved in the Program. If requests are made at least ten (10) business days prior to the activity start date, DSLBD will arrange for language and ASL interpretation services for event organizers who confirm their participation and need.
2. In-person classes, workshops, or events funded by the District will be held at ADA-compliant locations or will offer virtual attendance options.

E. Conflicts

1. In the event of a conflict between the terms and conditions of the Program application and any applicable federal or local law or regulation, or any ambiguity related thereto, the terms of the applicable law or regulation will control, and it shall be the responsibility of the applicant to ensure compliance.
2. The Program application shall be governed and interpreted under the laws of the District and any applicable federal laws without regard to conflict of law principles. It shall be the responsibility of the applicant to ensure compliance.

F. Reservation of Rights

1. Funding for stipend awards is contingent on continued funding available for this Program.
2. Publication of these Official Rules does not commit DSLBD to make any prize or stipend awards or otherwise provide funding under this Program.
3. DSLBD reserves the right to issue addenda, modifications, and/or amendments subsequent to the issuance of the Official Rules, or to rescind the Official Rules.
4. DSLBD will post addenda, modifications, or amendments in the online application (see below). Applicants are responsible for reviewing and adhering to any Official Rules addenda, modifications, or amendments.
5. DSLBD may suspend or terminate outstanding Official Rules pursuant to its own authority or any DSLBD or federal regulation or requirement.
6. DSLBD may conduct on-site business visits to verify information submitted in an application. The Department’s access and ability to verify such information shall not be unreasonably withheld.
7. DSLBD serves as its own reference in evaluating applications; it is not required to consult with outside parties and may consider applicants’ performance and conduct in previous competitions.

