

# 2023 WeAspire Pitch Program

## Official Program Details:

## Application Process & Rules

Last Updated: January 17, 2023



### 1. Objective

The Department of Small and Local Business Development (DSLBD) is excited to announce that we will be accepting applications for the **2023 WeAspire Training and Pitch Competition**.

The training program and competition are for DC residents who were previously incarcerated and/or justice involved (parole or probation) and seeking to build or launch their businesses. WeAspire will include a 14-week business training program from late March through the end of June, with the final pitch competition on June 24, 2023. Sessions will meet on Mondays and Wednesdays from 5:30 – 7 pm. Every Monday will be online, while we will have 3 required in-person sessions on Wednesdays. Participants must be able to plan to attend all sessions. Sessions will cover aspects of starting and running a business, including business planning, market analysis, regulatory requirements, marketing, and business promotion, social media, and pitching your business. Missing more than 2 sessions without any explanation can result in removal from the program. Only those who complete the program will be eligible for the pitches.

Through a series of pitch competitions, Aspire participants will be awarded both direct financial support for their businesses as well as in-kind contributions such as financial advising, marketing assistance, and mentorship. Every participant who completes Aspire Pitch will receive \$2,000 in pitch awards. DSLBD intends to allocate **up to \$10,000** in pitch prize funding for each pitch participant from the \$200,000 in available funding. Pitch prizes will be awarded by partner Marshall Heights Community Development Organization.

### 2. Online Application

Apply at <https://www.zoomgrants.com/zgf/Aspire23>. Applications and all documents will only be accepted via this application: none will be accepted over email.

### 3. Deadlines

There are three deadlines that applicants should monitor.

- **Eligibility Pre-review:** Applicants who complete their application by Feb 14, 2023, will receive a courtesy review of their application for eligibility and completeness, with an option to correct prior to the final deadline. This will be conducted on a rolling basis.

Look for program and application information sessions at <http://DSLBD.eventbrite.com>.

Send all questions in writing to [Inno.ED@dc.gov](mailto:Inno.ED@dc.gov). No phone calls will be accepted.

- **Questions Deadline:** The deadline for a guaranteed response to questions is February 24, 2023, 2 pm EST. Questions asked after this time cannot be guaranteed a response before the application deadline.
- **Final deadline:** The final deadline is February 28, 2023, at 2 pm. No applications will be accepted after this deadline. No exceptions.

## 4. Eligibility Requirements

Only current District of Columbia residents who were previously incarcerated and/or justice-involved through parole or probation are eligible to apply. We will ask all applicants to attest that they were previously incarcerated or justice involved, but we will not request further details regarding the incarceration or any underlying charges. Participants should be aware that program participation will represent to the public that participants were previously incarcerated or justice involved.

Applicants must have or be planning for a for-profit business. This can include social enterprises with significant social missions but cannot include stand-alone nonprofits.

Applicants must not have won funds from WeAspire 2021 or 2022: the 2021 cohort may be able to attend trainings and sessions with permission from the Aspire Program Manager. Aspire participants from 2020 and prior are eligible for WeAspire 2023.

DSLBD will be accepting applications in Winter/Spring 2023 for both the Dream Pitch 2023 and WeAspire 2023 Programs. Eligible businesses may apply for both programs but will only be selected to participate in one program in 2023. To learn more about the Dream Pitch 2023 Program and eligibility requirements, visit <https://dslbd.dc.gov>.

Documentation required in the application includes:

- DC ID or other proof of residency information (if this is a barrier, please contact us at [inno.ed@dc.gov](mailto:inno.ed@dc.gov), and we will connect you with supportive resources)
- Attestation (a formal statement) that you are a returning citizen
- Attestation (a formal statement) that you have a clear business idea (if a new business) or are a majority owner in the business (if an existing business)

Pending acceptance, the following documentation will be required to join the WeAspire 2023 cohort:

- An IRS W9 form: we will provide one to be completed after acceptance
- Bank account details
- Proof of business licensure (for existing businesses)
- Other documentation about the use of pitch prize funds as may be required by the operator organization

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## 5. Restrictions on Allowable Uses of Funds

Pitch prize funds will be required to be used on business expenses for the named business.

## 6. Selection Process

### A. Application Acceptance or Rejection

Following the closing of the application deadline on February 28, 2023, DSLBD will disqualify applications that do not comply with the instructions in the official rules. The Agency reserves the right to accept or deny any or all applications if the Agency determines it is in the best interest of the Agency to do so. The Agency shall notify the applicant if it rejects that applicant's proposal. The Agency may suspend or terminate any of these rules pursuant to its own authority or any applicable federal regulation or requirement.

### B. Selection Criteria and Review Process for Program Entrance

DSLBD intends to select pitch participants recipients through a competitive process. Applications that are submitted by the final deadline will be reviewed for completeness and will be scored by a review committee. The review committee will score based on the questions in the application on the criteria below:

- Commitment to Aspire and to their business -- 40%
- Clarity of idea and goals – 20%
- Business viability – 20%
- Clear benefit for Aspire participation & funding – 20%

### C. Selection Criteria for Award of Pitch Funding

Pitch funds will be awarded on a competitive process. There will be a series of public pitch events in June 2023, during which panels of judges will evaluate businesses that will proceed to the final pitch competition. Pitch scoring criteria will be made to all Pitch Program participants prior to the competitions and throughout the pitch preparations.

## 7. Application Questions

The application consists of two portions: demographic and eligibility questions, followed by the competitive application questions that are listed below with percentages repeating the above as to how they will factor into final evaluation.

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## A. Eligibility & Demographic Questions

The application includes three demographic questions that will not be viewed by reviewers and **will not** affect the application review at all. These questions are asked to understand the diversity of the applicant pool better and to improve outreach to reach audiences that reflect the diversity of the returning citizen population. These questions include age bracket, Ward, and an open-ended question to describe self-identity.

The eligibility questions are:

- Are you a District resident? Residency is a requirement for participation.
  - We request an upload of DC ID or other proof of residency information such as a lease, utility bill, or another similar document. If this is a barrier, please contact us at [inno.ed@dc.gov](mailto:inno.ed@dc.gov), and we will connect you with supportive resources to access ID.
- Initial below to attest (make a formal statement) that you are a returning citizen
- Initial below to attest (make a formal statement) that you have a clear business idea (if a new business) or are a majority owner in the business (if an existing business)

## B. Competitive Application Questions

Each question is tied directly to our evaluation criteria for Aspire participants, with a majority emphasis on commitment.

- Commitment to Aspire and to their business -- 40%
  - Personal Statement: Commitment is essential for a successful business and for successful participation in WeAspire 2023. Tell us more about "Why Now" and "Why Aspire"? Why do you want this business to grow, and where do you want to go with the business? Applicants do not need to write their personal statements: they can also record it as a video and either upload it OR submit a link to a YouTube, Vimeo, TikTok, Facebook, or other website links.)
  - We know life happens, but a commitment to attending this program is essential. Missing more than one session without an explanation may result in being disqualified from the program and the pitch competition. Will you be able to attend all Mondays and Wednesdays sessions, from 5:30 - 7 pm, for 14 weeks beginning on March 27 and continuing until June 24?
  - Statement of Support (from friend, family member, colleague, or supervisor):
- Clarity of idea and goals – 20%
  - How would you describe your business or business idea in 1 sentence? *Feel free to follow this format: "My business sells / will sell [FILL IN WITH PRODUCT OR SERVICE] to [FILL IN WITH CUSTOMER], and we are unique because we [FILL IN WITH YOUR SPECIAL BUSINESS DETAILS]."*
  - Describe the size and stage of your business or your business idea. Include any of the following that is relevant for your business: number of clients/customers, number of full or part-time employees, and sales (monthly or annually).

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**Send all questions in writing to [Inno.ED@dc.gov](mailto:Inno.ED@dc.gov). No phone calls will be accepted.**

- Business viability – 20%
  - What experience do you have in this sector, if any? If you have an existing business, tell us about your successes. If you have a new business, feel free to include any type of experience, whether professional or personal. For example, “I always cooked with my grandmother, and I want to bring her recipes to the public,” or “I learned carpentry while incarcerated and have now been making furniture for years.” If you have no experience, what makes you excited about the sector?
  - How does or how might your business make money? What will you be selling (product, service)?
  - What demonstrates the need for your business? For existing businesses, what/who is your market? For new businesses, what gap do you see in the community that your business will fill?
- The clear benefit for Aspire participation & funding – 20%
  - Participation in the classes is required to participate in Aspire Pitch and to receive awards from this program. With that in mind, if you receive \$2,000 at the end of this program, how would you use it to further your business?
  - Why do you want to participate in the program? What makes you most excited to join WeAspire?

## 8. Program Acceptance Information

Notification announcements of selected pitch program participants will be made by or around March 14 - 18, 2023. Selected applicants will be required to provide proof of COVID-19 vaccination, and, as applicable, proof of booster shots.

Eligibility to pitch in the final Aspire Pitch 2023 is dependent on active participation in program and completion of the pitch prep sessions. Only individual businesses that meet these requirements will be allowed to enter the pitch to be awarded funds unless excepted by DSLBD in its discretion.

Only individuals and businesses that participate in the pitch will be eligible to receive pitch funding unless excepted by DSLBD in its discretion.

## 9. Reservations

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

### A. Application Acceptance

Applications must be made through the online portal at <https://www.ZoomGrants.com/zgf/WeAspire23>. DSLBD will not accept applications submitted via hand delivery, email, mail, or courier service unless accepted by DSLBD due to extenuating circumstances. DSLBD will not review late submissions or incomplete applications.

Look for program and application information sessions at <http://DSLBD.eventbrite.com>.  
**Send all questions in writing to [Inno.ED@dc.gov](mailto:Inno.ED@dc.gov). No phone calls will be accepted.**

## B. Reservations

Funding for any pitch prize is contingent on continued funding available for this program.

Publication of these Official Rules does not commit DSLBD to make any funding prize awards.

DSLBD reserves the right to issue addenda and/or amendments subsequent to the issuance of the Official Rules or to rescind the Official Rules. DSLBD will post addenda or amendments in the online application (see below). Applicants are responsible for reviewing and adhering to any Official Rules addenda or amendments. Funding for pitch prizes is contingent on continued funding for this program. The Official Rules do not commit the Agency to make any funding awards.

DSLBD may suspend or terminate an outstanding Official Rules pursuant to its own authority or any DSLBD federal regulation or requirement.

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.

DSLBD shall not be liable for any costs incurred by an applicant in the preparation of one or more applications for this Program. The applicant understands and agrees that all costs incurred in developing and preparing any application shall be the applicant's sole responsibility.

DSLBD may conduct pre-award on-site visits to verify information submitted in an application.

DSLBD serves as their own reference in evaluating applications.

DSLBD may enter into negotiations with an program participant and adopt revisions of the participant's application that may result from the negotiations.

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, then the provisions of the applicable law or regulation shall control and it shall be the responsibility of the applicant to ensure compliance.