

2024 Aspire Incubator Program

Official Application Instructions & Program Details

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The Department of Small and Local Business Development presents

WE ASPIRE

Incubator Program

APPLY BY MARCH 1, 2024

The Aspire Incubator Program is a cohort-based training program that empowers DC returning citizen entrepreneurs to start, build, and scale their businesses. Participants will be awarded milestone stipends with a total value of \$5,000 per participant.

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DSLBD
DEPT. OF SMALL & LOCAL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DC MURIEL BOWSER, MAYOR

Overview

The Department of Small and Local Business Development (DSLBD) is excited to announce that we will be accepting applications for the **2024 Aspire Incubator Program**, starting *January 26, 2024*.

The Aspire Incubator Program is a cohort-based training program for up to 20 DC-residents who are returning citizens and/or justice-impacted (parole or probation) starting or growing a DC-based business. The Aspire Incubator Program is an opportunity for participants to grow a DC-based microbusinesses within a community of support and receive stipends for completing various business development milestones for up to \$5,000 in direct stipends. This will include completing planning, regulatory, finance, and public speaking milestones. Microbusinesses accepted into this competitive program will receive business development training and support in the following areas:

- Regulatory Set Up and Compliance

- Business Pitch & Showcase
- Financial Projections and Financial Management
- Marketing & Branding
- Peer Mentorship

Class and program schedules will be finalized around April 2024 when all program service providers are finalized with some required and some optional classes. Applicants will be asked to complete a survey about general availability in their applications for programming anticipated for April-June/July 2024.



Program Eligibility

The Aspire Incubator program is for returning citizens and/or justice-impacted residents. Justice-impacted means those who have been incarcerated or detained in a prison, immigration detention center, local jail, juvenile detention center, or any other carceral setting, or those who have been sentenced to parole or probation.

Participation in the Aspire Incubator program is a public declaration of reentry and/or justice-impacted status. *We understand that not everyone who is justice-impacted is comfortable with sharing their status publicly. If you are not comfortable, you may prefer to not participate in the Aspire Incubator program, and may reach out to DSLBD for referrals to alternative business development support. Reach out to Inno.ED@dc.gov if you are seeking other other support.*

Program eligible microbusinesses and entrepreneurs must be DC-residents operating or seeking to start a DC-based business. *This program is only for For-Profit businesses.* Applicants and program participants must be the majority business owner. Multiple participants per business are not accepted. **Participants in the 2023 Aspire Pitch Program who received a pitch award and/or selected participants for the 2024 Dream Pitch Program are not eligible to participate in Aspire Incubator this year.**

DSLBD will be accepting applications in Winter/Spring 2024 for both the Dream Pitch 2024 and the Aspire Incubator 2024 programs. Eligible businesses may apply for both programs but will only be selected to participate in one program in 2024. To learn more about the Dream Pitch 2024 Program and eligibility requirements, visit <https://dslbd.dc.gov>.



How to Apply

Submit applications here: <https://survey.alchemer.com/s3/7694801/Aspire-Incubator-2024>. All application and supporting documents must be submitted in the online application system. Incomplete applications may be rejected as incomplete.

Application Deadlines

Applications must be submitted by **March 1, 2024 at 2pm eastern. No Exceptions.**

There are other deadlines that applicants should monitor.

Program Application Deadlines

1st PRE-ELIGIBILITY REVIEW	2ND PRE-ELIGIBILITY REVIEW	QUESTIONS DEADLINE	FINAL DEADLINE
FEBRUARY 9TH 2 pm eastern	FEBRUARY 23TH 2 pm eastern	FEBRUARY 27 2 pm eastern	MARCH 1st 2 pm eastern

Eligibility Pre-Review. Applicants who complete eligibility documentation requirements by or before pre-eligibility review deadlines, will receive a courtesy review and determination on their eligibility on a rolling basis.

Information Sessions

Information Sessions: DSLBD will offer multiple information sessions to support applicants in understanding these Official Instructions and providing an opportunity to ask questions live. Register directly for an information session here: <https://bit.ly/Aspire2024QA>.

Questions: All questions must be asked by the question deadline of February 27, 2024 at 2 pm eastern. 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 in an information or Q&A session. **No phone calls accepted.**

Required Eligibility Documents

Program eligible DC residents must be the majority owner of the current or planned business, the resident must identify as a returning citizen or justice-impacted resident. Participation in the program is public acknowledgement of reentry or justice-impacted status. Required eligibility documents must be submitted in the online application system.

Required documentation will demonstrate:

- Identity of the Majority Owner
- Proof of Residency in DC (DC identification or alternative documentation)
- Business Location or Planned Location
- Proof of Business Licensure (for existing businesses) OR *participation in a licensing support session (for not yet licensed businesses)*
- Proof of Majority Ownership
- Attestation of Reentry or Justice-Impacted Status

For accepted applicants invited to join the program, the following documentation will also be required to join the Aspire Incubator 2024 cohort:

- An IRS W9 form: we will provide one to be completed after acceptance
- Bank account details to be provided securely to the payment provider (to receive stipend payments)
- Other documentation about the use of stipend award funds as may be required by any official program operator organization or DSLBD
- Final confirmation of schedule availability for the finalized schedule

All information, documents, and attestations must be submitted into the online system in the eligibility section for review. Applicants who do not meet eligibility requirements will not be evaluated. If an applicant submits multiple applications, DSLBD will only review the last submitted application. False information may result in program forfeiture.

Use the checklist below to ensure that you have all of the required information and documents prior to completing or submitting an application. **Please note that requirements have been broken down into two categories:**

- **Licensed Business**
- **Not Yet Licensed**

View all requirements based on your business status at the time of application.

REQUIRED ITEMS	LICENSED BUSINESS	NOT YET LICENSED
Photo ID & Proof of Residency	✓	✓
Valid DC Business License	✓	✗
Attend a License Support Session	✗	✓
Proof of Majority Ownership	✓	✗
Business Bank Account	✗	✗
Reentry or Justice-Involved Business Owner Attestation	✓	✓

Learn more about each required item below:

Valid Photo ID/Residency Information

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 and documentation indicating DC residency including one of the following documents dated December 1, 2023 or later<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Utility Bill○ Bank Statement○ Paystub○ Formal Government letter verifying residency
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● <i>If this is a barrier, please contact us at Inno.ED@dc.gov, and we will connect you with supportive resources for obtaining identification through the DC Ready Center.</i>
NOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● ID must be active and not expired● ID from states other than DC are not accepted

Valid DC Business License

DESCRIPTION	PDF/photo copy of the Business License issued by the Department of Licensing and Consumer Protection (DLCP) or an appropriate alternative licensing authority in DC
APPROVED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Basic Business License (BBL), OR● Professional Business License that precludes a BBL● 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 with DLCP● <i>If your business is not licensed, then attend a license support session and see the requirement box below</i>

License Support Session

DESCRIPTION	Attend one virtual license support session in partnership with the DLCP Small Business Resource Center (SBRC) to learn the more about the licensing process if your business is not yet licensed.
APPROVED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Copy of attendance confirmation email received from DSLBD, OR● Copy of attendance confirmation email received from DLCP SBRC
NOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Group sessions are scheduled for:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ February 6, 2024 at 2 pm○ February 26, 2024 at 2 pm○ Register for either session here: https://bit.ly/2024SBRC.● Individual meetings with an SBRC team member during the application period are also accepted. You can schedule to meet with an SBRC representative in two ways:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Small Biz Assist at the MLK Library two Wednesdays in February: https://dslbd.dc.gov/smallbizassist○ SBRC Virtual Meeting Schedule: https://dlcpsbrc.ecenterdirect.com/events?reset=1

Business Bank Account

DESCRIPTION	Banking account for the business
APPROVED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Voided Check (Must have the business name and address)● Direct Deposit Form● Bank Statement
NOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● The account should not be a personal account● The account needs to have the capacity to receive deposits● <i>This requirement is only for accepted applicants</i>

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 with entering your full name.
NOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● No upload required● Applicants shown to have falsely attested may forfeit participation in the program.

Returning Citizen/Justice-Impacted Business Owner Attestation

DESCRIPTION	Attestation within the online system about returning citizen/justice-impacted status
APPROVED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Acknowledge the statement in the system with entering applicant's full name.
NOTES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Participation in the Aspire Incubator program functionally serves as public acknowledgement of reentry/justice-impacted status.● Applicants shown to have falsely attested may forfeit participation in the program.

Selection Process

DSLBD will select program participants through a competitive application process. A review panel will be put together consisting of DC Government employees who review **ELIGIBLE** applications received by the submission deadline of **March 1, 2024 at 2pm**.

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.

- Clear benefit for the Aspire Incubator program participation (25%)
- Business Goals & Growth Potential (50%)
- Commitment to the Business & Program (25%)



Competitive Application Questions

The application is broken down into three sections and corresponds directly to the scoring criteria listed in the *Selection Process* section of this document.

Clear Benefit for Aspire Incubator program participation

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 and 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? (Video upload optional)

Business Goals & Growth Potential

1. What is the dream for your business? (Vision for the business in the next year or beyond)
2. What challenges have you faced with accessing business capital, marketing, business financial management?
3. If you received the full set of milestone stipends of \$5,000 for different milestones, how would you use those funds to grow the business?

Commitment to the Business

1. Tell us the “why” behind the business. How did the business come to be?
2. What preparation went into starting the business?

Letter of Support

- Include one short letter or video from someone who is supportive of your business development journey. This can be from any person in your life who is supportive of you developing a business.



Program Acceptance Details

Notification of selected program participants will be made **on or around April 5-15, 2024**.

Selected program participants will be required to review final program scheduling and if the schedule is acceptable attend the following before participation into the program:

All selected program participants in addition to attending the the Program On-boarding session must do the following continue participation in the Aspire Incubator program:

- Maintain active participation in the full program.** Participants are required to attend regular program activities such as classes and cohort activities. The program is a hybrid model, some sessions will be virtual and others in-person with various providers. Absences must be approved by reaching out to the designated attendance manager, and an 85% attendance rate of required activities is required to be eligible to maintain in the program.
- Attend Business Support Sessions.** Additional opportunities, both direct and referral, will be made available to support participants in building out their businesses with a strong foundation.

Only participants that complete the requirements listed above will be allowed to continue in the program to complete all milestone stipends.

Aspire Incubator Program

The Aspire Incubator Program is an opportunity for businesses to receive technical assistance, training, and peer mentoring support to start and grow a DC-based business with stipend support of up to \$5,000 per participant. **Stipends will be made as micropayments throughout the program based upon participants achieving various milestones of program completion and business development.** Participants will prepare business plans and budgeting documents, business pitch decks, and present their businesses in a series of mini-pitches and/or showcases to continue to build confidence, feedback and support.



Restrictions on Allowable Uses of Funds

Stipend funds must be used on business expenses.

Reservations

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

A. Application Acceptance

Applications must be made through the online portal. DLSBD will not accept applications submitted via hand delivery, email, mail, or courier service unless accepted by DSLBD due to extenuating circumstances. DLSBD will not review late submissions or incomplete applications.

B. Reservations

Funding for any stipend awards is contingent on continued funding available for this program.

Publication of these 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 to review and adhere to any Official Rules addenda or amendments. Funding for milestone stipends and/or 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 cost 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 a program participant and adopt revisions of the participant's application that may result from negotiations.

Applicants participating in the Aspire Incubator program accept that all pitch competitions will be photographed and video recorded.

Applicants participating in the program accept that they must complete 85% or more of all required program classes and activities to be eligible to continue participation in the program.

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.

