



NATIONAL LEADERSHIP GRANTS FOR LIBRARIES

Sample Application LG-259140-OLS-25
Project Category: Community-Centered Implementation

Ashley County Library

Amount awarded by IMLS: \$62,542

Ashley County Library will provide entrepreneurs with library based resources needed to start and grow their small businesses and increase long-term sustainability. Applicants will participate in one of two cohort training sessions. Professional organizations and individuals will provide expert assistance in creating business plans, securing funding, marketing, goal setting, and more. Participants will have access to targeted business research, the equipment to create marketing materials, and needed technology for performance of routine bookkeeping. A business fair recognizing graduates and their products will be held at the end of the cohort periods.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

Introduction:

The Ashley County Library (ACL) is seeking to assist entrepreneurs by providing business training to increase the success and longevity of new and existing operations and are requesting \$62,791.96 to meet this goal. By adapting the [American Library Associations Libraries Build Business](#) program, we will be tailoring various initiatives from this program to meet our demographics. We intend to offer three cohort sessions, consisting of eight entrepreneurs each, for a total impact of twenty-four small businesses owners in our Ashley County. Partners are the Hamburg Area Chamber of Commerce, as well as the Arkansas Arts Council and the Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development Center. Entrepreneurs participating in this program will document an increased media and marketing presence, create sustainable long-term goals, and develop a viable business plan.

Project Justification:

In recent years, Ashley County has lost two major sources of employment causing economic hardship throughout our county and surrounding areas. Some of our residents have left the area and others have used these circumstances as an opportunity to follow their dreams of being self-employed. To support these makers, Hamburg has a location that has opened a “flea market” type venue.

Traditionally, a “flea market” has rental booths for the resale items of the vendor’s choice. In this instance, our local business adopted the name “marketplace” and has rental booths for small businesses or boutiques featuring new and/or handmade items. Sometimes pop-up booths are hosted for those who have not committed to a dedicated storefront booth or carries a more mobile or on-the-spot customized product.

This has been a wonderful opportunity for our community. It gives our local entrepreneurs an opportunity to showcase their wares, beta-test new products, and get the word out about their businesses. Many of these entrepreneurs have a “permanent” booth at this local market and others set up at our Farmer’s Markets during the season and during various local festivals. But they don’t last.

Many customers find a product they love, locally harvested honey, handmade soaps and candles, or any number of bakery or confectionery items only to have them close their businesses after a year or so. These vendors may still be producing these items, but on a small or as ordered basis. Some had disappeared completely, leaving their customers searching for a replacement to their must-have products. At the height of business, the Marketplace offered forty-seven unique vendors. That number has since dropped to less than thirty.

Not only is this frustrating for the customers, it is disheartening for these small business owners who put a lot of personal capital into a business that did not last. When talking with some of these business owners, they revealed there were financial issues.

Whether it was the lack of funds to invest in needed equipment, the lack of product movement, or simply the logistics of materials, marketing, etc., the finances became more than they could handle.

Others cited time concerns. They produced items as a hobby after their full-time job and the business grew to the point they could no longer keep up production. They weren't sure how to juggle what turned out to be two full-time jobs, if they could or should hire help, how to manage production for bulk orders, and weren't financially secure enough to quit their day job and pursue their passion. It was too much of a good thing and they closed their doors due to lack of future growth planning.

Then there were those who never really had a chance. We buy with our eyes, often before we even try a product. Logos matter. The font used on those logos matters. The color schemes matter. Product packaging matters. There were vendors with great products, but such poor packaging and marketing that it made consumers question the quality of the products because of the poor packaging design execution.

In addition, some of these vendors had little to no social media presence. We are in a rural county that runs on social media. As a public library, we know the value of a social media presence. We know which platforms work best for us and know when to post announcements for the highest rate of possible views. We want to help teach these algorithms to our business owners. A simple site with their logo, great pictures, and information about their products would do as much to boost sales in this area than almost anything else they can do.

There are easy tricks to social media that can be taught. We want to teach them easy techniques for taking more professional photographs. Working ahead to schedule posts can save them administrative time, but keep their product front and center for viewers. Knowing the proper tags to use for items and photos, as well as following other similar businesses can increase their social media presence. All of this helps build business.

We want to help our area entrepreneurs realize their dreams in a way that is sustainable. Our overall target group consists of twenty-four existing entrepreneurs as well as those who would like to start their own businesses, but aren't sure where to begin. Our library serves seven incorporated towns as well as multiple outlying communities in our county. Each one of these locations have residents who are makers and creators and budding entrepreneurs. We want to offer them the opportunity to achieve long-term success.

Among our dreamers are those who wish to have a larger digital presence. Broadband access is growing, but still limited in many areas in our county. We have had more than one request for podcast space. We have the bandwidth to support podcasting, but not the soundproof or private spaces needed to produce a quality product. Providing a soundproof space would also be of benefit for virtual meetings without reserving an entire room.

The benefits of this endeavor would be far reaching. Not only would our target group cohort members benefit, but also the consumers in our county. Our consumers want to support local people and local businesses. Keeping our money at home is important and of course, shopping locally enables us to do this. Even with increased opportunities locally, a number of these businesses could expand into mail-order enterprises. This program would not be limited to brick and mortar storefronts.

In addition, by sharing our processes, resources, and experiences, we will enable other small and rural libraries to benefit by adapting our materials to meet the needs of their communities. By sharing instructions and best practices, we are equipping our community as well as other library systems to use and adapt this information. We are seeking to improve community well-being through libraries and archives by providing workforce training targeted at area entrepreneurs.

In researching ways to create this program, we found the American Library Association's Libraries Build Businesses (ALA LBB) program. It offered great ideas to implement, but 87% of the libraries in this program had a much larger service area and a more metropolitan population. Even though these programs were on such different levels and with resources unavailable to us, there were ideas we could adapt to fit our smaller and much more rural community.

The greatest takeaway from the LBB program was how libraries have stepped in the gap and connected business owners with needed resources. This grant would enable us to offer equitable access to business software, equipment, and training to assist entrepreneurs without the extra overhead these resources would add to their budgets. Helping with the administrative expenses will give them more capital to put into materials for their products.

Expert advice is needed as most of our local entrepreneurs start with an idea and even a great product, but they do not have a background in business financial literacy. More often than not, they don't separate business funding from personal funds. They rarely incorporate or take legal steps to separate their business and personal lives. They do not know how to consistently document in order to better manage spending trends, successes or failures, and possibilities for product growth and development.

Often, they do not know how to create a business plan to seek funding or the importance of creating a timeline of goals and objectives. Small business owners must learn to plan for sales plateaus. Planning can involve financial decisions to cover materials and overhead during lean months or product promotions to eliminate extra stock.

Some have an idea, but not the tools or materials to create and beta-test their ideas. Their goals for expansion can go unrealized because they are in the trenches producing product A, when they really need another most costly piece of equipment for product B. We want to support our maker community by providing them the information

and resources they need to develop healthy business practices, particularly including planning for future growth.

There were many initiatives from the ALA LBB we researched. There was not a single program that did exactly what we had envisioned, but there are elements from many we chose to adapt. One of the key points of inspiration is the Entrepreneur Academy hosted by the Baltimore (Maryland) County Public Library. As a participant in the ALA LBB project, they created an academy with seven sessions for budding entrepreneurs. They thoughtfully rebranded their existing resources and brought in area business people and experts to host classes.

We liked how much their library staff was involved. There was a staff member present for all classes and acted as host for events. In addition, they gave participants the opportunity to schedule appointments with My Librarian for Small Business, giving the patron dedicated time with a library staff member for purposes of in-depth research and referrals.

Our cohort idea developed directly from this program and we settled on a range of class themes, from what to do with an initial idea to how to reshape an existing business. We are most passionate about our entrepreneurs making sound financial and legal decisions. We have hard workers with great products, but very little operations experience or knowledge.

Another source of inspiration is the Dallas B.R.A.I.N. program. The Dallas (Texas) Public Library worked to make business resources and education more equitable by creating a network. As stated earlier, many of the resources available in and to Dallas are not available in rural south Arkansas. We really liked how some of the resources Dallas used offered seminars, networking events, and coworking spaces. Our library would step into this hosting role and our idea to host a cohort showcase came from this program.

The Ferguson Library in Stamford, Connecticut hosted The Stamford Small Business Resource Center. A few of the tools they mentioned as being vital to their program are social media accounts and websites, printed materials, designated spaces, and access to computers, Zoom accounts, audiovisual equipment and small business services. We want to make these tools available to our local entrepreneurs, with related training and assistance as needed.

Although our county relies heavily on social media, there are still a number of residents without an online presence. They rely on newspaper and radio advertisements, as well as paper products such as business cards, flyers, brochures, and posters. Enabling our cohort entrepreneurs to create low-cost professional quality printed materials for their businesses is an expense for which they do not have to initially budget.

The Ferguson (Missouri) Municipal Public Library took it a step further by adding virtual services to their library. These included “virtual meeting kits” that could be

checked out and contained a laptop, case, headset with mic and a wireless hotspot. This allowed their area entrepreneurs to conduct business at any location. They also equipped an in-person meeting room with a 3-D printer for prototypes, and subscribed to business themed databases for an additional resource.

We want to enable our meeting room to be a home-away-from-home office. Cellular service in our area is still unreliable, even with hotspots so the virtual meeting kit would not be feasible for us. But, it challenged us to consider what a viable workspace would need to contain. We want to have a business center with a dedicated computer and needed business software, audiovisual equipment for online meetings, and a professional quality printer, including a poster printer.

We decided to dream big and incorporate a mini-maker space by adding new equipment, like a 3-D printer, to what we already have, for the creation of prototypes. By designating this space and enabling a reservation feature, our patrons can schedule business meetings, host or attend Zoom sessions, and work in private.

The Laramie County (Wyoming) Library System implemented a support system for entrepreneurs by providing a web page of resources, and the equipment and software needed to create videos, podcasts, and social media posts. As our county is well off the beaten path, access to recording studios and equipment for public use is not available. We have had interest expressed in podcast production in the past, but it has always been cost prohibitive. By creating a mini-studio in the library, we would make recording a possibility. We picture an area that could double as an online meeting space as well.

As it has been stated, we have great people with really great ideas and products, but rarely do they have the investment capital to begin pursuing their dreams. We want to provide them not just knowledge, but some of the most basic needs such as equitable access, technology training, and equipment to help facilitate their dreams.

This project will also add to what we are already doing at the Ashley County Library. We currently offer one-on-one assistance to patrons and heavily assist with a lot of business related chores. We have created websites, assisted in the design of logos, beta tested baked goods (!), produced printed materials, and promoted in-house and on-line as permitted with our library policies.

The ability to expand our services would be such a benefit to our patrons and community members. There are quite a few economic initiatives being made around our county and we hope to be part of those. As a not-for-profit organization, our involvement is encouraged, but often quite limited. This initiative would allow us to put grant-based funding back into our community in a way that will pay future dividends. In addition, we can capitalize on what we do best, which is providing resources to our community.

Project Work Plan:

Upon notification of the grant award, marketing for the project and scheduling will begin for an interest meeting. This initial meeting will be conducted by Holly Gillum, the library director, and a representative from the Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development Center (ASB TDC). “Does Starting A Small Business Work for Me?” will give an overview of the project as well as distribute applications for cohort positions. A rubric will be created to score cohort applications to ensure these positions are given to entrepreneurs who are committed to building their businesses.

Applications will be considered under a blind review by the director, the Chamber of Commerce Director, and the ASB TDC liaison. As these outside positions are currently fluid, we are unable to give names of these parties, but have commitments from each foundation to assist in whatever way possible. Our Chamber works directly with local citizens wishing to open storefronts or to better market existing businesses. The Chamber director will bring a wealth of local information to this team. The ASB TDC liaison has been trained as a consultant to small businesses offering tailored guidance for each entrepreneur. Their areas are planning, financial analysis, market research, loan packaging, marketing, growth and more.

While applications are being taken, ordering materials will begin as well as scheduling of the cohort workshops. It is our goal to have our materials gathered and business hub additions completed before cohort workshops begin, approximately six weeks after award notification. We want our cohort members to see the seriousness in which we take this project as they come into the workshops. Having a completed work center will be an encouragement to them and perhaps spark new ideas. The goal is to host three cohort sessions, consisting of eight participants each, for a total impact of twenty-four small businesses in our county.

Our current roster of workshops will follow the following format, but with the caveat they can be adapted to suit the needs and requests of cohort participants as needed. We want this to be a collaborative setting in which we present general information, but also allow the cohort members to request specific information for a specialized workshop, if possible. We will be pulling materials from the Libraries Build Business participants, suggested resources from the Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development Center, and adapting existing online small business materials as needed.

Workshop One: Making it Official

This workshop will be hosted by ASB TDC liaison and deal with promoting the proper way to set up a business. This involves creating a business plan, a schedule for growth, marketing, and financing. This will be an overview to assist cohort members in how to create needed documents or add to their existing plans for longevity. A time management component will also be heavily discussed for those with full-time employment or external commitments.

Workshop Two: Small Business 101: How to Get Started Financially

This workshop will be hosted by one or more members of our local banking systems and licensed CPA, Shann Carpenter, a small business owner herself. These banking positions can be fluid, but we want to ask representatives from our five major banks in Hamburg to present. The financial institutions are Simmons Bank, Century Next Bank, Southern Bankcorp, Timberline Federal Credit Union, and Commercial Capital Bank. Each of these banks require rigorous training for their employees. We hope to have the branch managers speak, but in lieu of any scheduling conflict, any bank employee with the training and authority to set up new accounts will be requested.

Banking can be a competitive market and everyone has their personal favorite. We want to allow our cohort members to “shop around” in one place for the best account services for their needs. Our CPA will advise cohort members on how to best set up accounts to separate business and personal needs, as well as paperwork that should be kept for tax purposes.

Workshop Three: How to Market My Business

This workshop will be hosted by our ASB TDC liaison and discuss the importance of product placement and public relations. We will explore ways to survey the local market for interest, the importance of social media, and how to best advertise for each unique business. This workshop will also include a one-on-one review of current marketing campaigns including social media, for feedback, suggestions, and ideas for implementation. This will be part of a two-part workshop leading into the following meeting of Image is Everything.

Workshop Four: Image is Everything

This workshop will be hosted by Anna Greenhaw, local art teacher and graphic designer. Packaging, color, font, and design play key roles in Greenhaw will assist cohort members with individualized logos if desired, or fine-tuning of existing business logos. Local photographer, Delores Cook, will give a brief tutorial on DIY professional photographs with lighting and staging hacks members can implement in the business hub or at home.

Workshop Five: TBD by Cohort Members

Depending on the products developed by these businesses, we want to host one of two representatives. If our cohort is more art based, we will have a liason from the Arkansas Arts Council to specifically address questions from artisan makers. There are special incentives offered to Arkansas Artists and business related information unique to maker fields.

If our group is more food-based production, we want to host a representative from the Arkansas Department of Health to give information about the Arkansas Food Freedom Act and how it changed the Cottage Food Laws. There are regulations that should be met and we want to make sure our cohort members are aware of the requirements.

Workshop Six: Wrap-Up and Presentation

This final cohort meeting will be a wrap up that includes a survey of the cohort program, a Show-Out and Show-Off of products, and information related to future opportunities for business growth. We would love to have these cohort members come back for future presentations with new cohort groups. At this time, our cohort members will also be awarded our scholarships for completion of the program. These funds will assist them in purchasing needed materials unique to their businesses.

Each workshop will present information, but also a time to work or schedule needed work between cohort workshops. We want our participants to be actively involved by implementing the changes needed or suggested as they move through the workshop format. We are planning to space our workshops two weeks apart, giving us a three-month window of commitment. We will also not be meeting during December or the summer months for ease of participant schedules and optimal participation. Workshops will be available live through Zoom and recorded for reference as needed.

We will also require evaluations at the end of each workshop to address the presentation, take questions, and indicate areas of improvement and success. We will use this feedback to improve the workshops for the following cohorts and evaluate the success of the program as a whole. We will also ask our cohort members to track success through social media statistics, sales statistics, and most hopefully, in increase in revenue.

Project Results:

Overall, the results of our project should be longevity for local businesses. We want to give our entrepreneurs the information they need for long-term success. We believe this comes in the form of planning for time constraints, lean sales, and seasonal rushes. We want them to have a foundation of awareness of the cycles in business and the ability to prepare accordingly. We also hope to increase the participation in local Farmers Markets and seasonal festivals, and if possible, host a Small Business Saturday to celebrate our cohort members.

By establishing a hub of operations in the library, local entrepreneurs will have a central location to assist with their business needs. Materials will be created to ensure this program is sustainable in the years to come. At the end of the project, we intend for new businesses to have plans to carry on past the bloom of the first year. For existing businesses, we intend to have assisted them in any needed modifications to their marketing, management, and production plans to create new levels of success to their existing business model.

All of our participating cohort members will leave our program with a viable business plan, a basic understanding of information required to be successful as they grow, a customized logo to fit their product, and a social media presence on the platforms of their choice.

As we create our resources, we are planning to adapt them for sharing with other libraries by providing templates that can be easily adjusted for a variety of users. Unlike most of the ALA's LBB program participants, we have a much smaller and more rural service area. Libraries with similar demographics may find encouragement to create their own programs from our experiences.

We will update and modify our templates as needed during the cohorts with a final version posted online after the cohort sessions have ended. We will create a dedicated web page with open access to all resources. We will produce a limited number of hard copies to provide at conference presentations, but also make all handouts available digitally. This project will receive as much local publicity as possible. The director has a weekly column in both local newspapers and will feature cohort information as available. Social media will also be used, including a project page we intend to share with the library and to be shared by partner organizations.

We will continue to document through articles submitted for publication in state and national library journals. We also plan to present our project at the state level by presenting at the Arkansas Library Association annual conference and at the national level by presenting at the Association for Rural and Small Libraries annual conference.

We have set up a system that, once established, will essentially maintain itself. Our business hub is largely self-sustaining and any additional expenses for consumables will be adapted into the library's programming budget. We intend to have three cohort sessions of eight participants each. This total of twenty-four possible participants will have a far-reaching impact on our community. By keeping these cohort numbers small, it better enables us to provide one-on-one personalized assistance to each cohort member.

Extended plans for the future are to set up a non-profit organization to raise funds for cohort scholarships for the continuation of this project and additions to the business hub. We would like to have a community supported business association where membership moves this initiative forward. There are no better mentors than the support of successful cohort members. We want to enable our community to continue to grow through the support of other local entrepreneurs.

Schedule of Completion				
Activity	August 2025	September	October	November
Information Meeting				
Cohort 1 Applications				
Cohort 1				
Workshop One				
Workshop Two				
Workshop Three				
Workshop Four				
Workshop Five				
Workshop Six				

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