

**WE RISE**

**TOGETHER**

**FOR AN EQUITABLE  
& JUST RECOVERY**

**Requests for Proposals: We Rise Together – Strengthening Mid-Stage Businesses and Worker-Owned Cooperatives**

<b>RFP Release Date:</b>	<b>January 30, 2025</b>
<b>Information Session:</b>	<b>February 5, 2025 @ 1pm</b>
<b>Full Application Deadline:</b>	<b>March 13, 2025</b>
<b>Site Visits/Interviews (Zoom):</b>	<b>April 28 – May 16, 2025 (possible extension to May 30)</b>
<b>Funding Decisions:</b>	<b>August 21, 2025</b>
<b>Grant Period</b>	<b>12 Months</b>
<b>Anticipated Number of Awards</b>	<b>3-8</b>
<b>Award Range \$</b>	<b>Up to \$300,000</b>
<b>Estimated We Rise Funding Total \$</b>	<b>\$800,000</b>

**Background**

*We Rise Together: For an Equitable & Just Recovery* is a coalition of public and private funders and communities accelerating equity in the Chicago region’s economic recovery so everyone who lives here can reach their full potential. To catalyze an equitable economic recovery from the COVID recession, We Rise focuses on grantmaking and engagement in communities hardest hit by COVID and those that are a majority Black and Latine because they are the places and people disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

**Definitions**

- **Mid-Stage Businesses:** For the purposes of this RFP, we are focused on mid-stage businesses ready to scale. The types of characteristics we expect to see that signal readiness to scale include, but are not limited to, enterprises that have been in operation for more than two years, with two to 50 employees or recent gross revenues between \$250,000 and \$5 million annually. These businesses provide essential services, amenities and employment in local economies, which is critical in fostering economic stability and growth. Despite their importance, they often lack the capital and technical support necessary to scale sustainably. In addition to requiring resources for general business growth, many mid-staged businesses face more complex operational challenges. These may include securing ownership or access to physical spaces for expansion, obtaining funding to address cash flow or capital needs, and developing tailored solutions such as sophisticated sales systems, e-commerce tools (e.g., drop shipping or digital marketing support), or software licenses for operational efficiency.

Applications might focus on providing training for pitch competitions, mentorship programs, or technical assistance tailored to challenges such as risk management, vendor negotiation, and supply chain optimization. Addressing these multifaceted needs is essential to unlocking their full potential and ensuring their long-term success in contributing to vibrant local economies.

- **Worker-Owned Cooperatives (Co-ops):** Cooperatives are values-driven businesses owned and self-managed by their workers. In a cooperative business structure, worker members participate in the profits, oversight, and often management of the enterprise using democratic decision-making practices. The co-op model is based on the principle that when worker members own the business, they actively participate in, contribute to, and benefit from its financial success. Co-ops also offer significant community wealth-building potential because they enable individuals, particularly those traditionally excluded from ownership opportunities, to directly participate in business decisions and profits. For the purposes of this RFP, we are focused on co-ops of any stage or scale — from start-ups to established enterprises.

### **Need / Opportunity**

In historically underserved, low-income neighborhoods across the Chicago area, mid-stage businesses and worker-owned cooperatives play a critical role in fostering economic vitality, creating jobs, and strengthening social connections. However, many of these businesses face persistent challenges in scaling their operations, securing the tools and resources necessary for growth, and effectively harnessing growth opportunities.

We know that mid-stage businesses are uniquely positioned to drive inclusive economic growth. However, they often operate with constrained resources and limited access to the capital, vendors, and infrastructure needed to achieve their full potential. Similarly, worker-owned co-ops offer a powerful model for shared ownership and wealth-building, empowering employees with a direct stake in the success of their enterprises. Yet, co-ops face unique challenges in securing resources for infrastructure, awareness, and technical support, particularly in sectors like retail, manufacturing, and trucking that are traditionally underfunded.

By moving resources directly to nonprofits working alongside these businesses, we aim to catalyze their ability to grow revenue, expand capacity, and invest in transformative initiatives like acquiring commercial spaces, adopting advanced tools, and strengthening their operational resilience. This RFP invites applications that present strategic approaches to strengthen these enterprises, supporting a sustainable recovery and fostering a resilient economic foundation across the region.

### **Goals**

While this is a one-year grant, the activities supported through this funding should be designed to contribute to the broader, long-term goals of improving local economic resilience. Work completed during the grant period should build a strong foundation for continued progress toward the following goals:

- By supporting business growth and cooperative development, projects should create stable job opportunities, increase local spending, and increase economic resilience within low-income neighborhoods.
- Through cooperative models and local business growth, projects should promote shared wealth-building, economic autonomy, and the growth of the local economy.
- Programs should enable businesses to scale effectively, increasing their capacity to serve and uplift their communities.
- Measure changes in access to capital, financial literacy, and use of business management tools.
- Track the number of new jobs created or maintained, particularly full-time roles with family-sustaining wages.
- Monitor improvements in operational resilience, such as enhanced access to infrastructure, technology, or technical assistance.

### **Outcomes & Measures of Progress (MOPs)**

Measures of Progress (MOPs) are specific, time-limited, and measurable indicators used to demonstrate progress toward achieving a project's objectives. They provide clear, reportable evidence that a grant recipient is effectively advancing its goals within the grant period and contributing to longer-term outcomes aligned with We Rise Together's goals and outcomes. Grant recipients are expected to select Outcomes and MOPs measurable during the grant term, ensuring alignment with the following:

#### **Outcomes** *(Select up to 3 Outcomes)*

1. Build Knowledge and Narrative
2. Improve Overall Financial Health
3. Increase Fundamental Business Finance Knowledge and Application
4. Strengthen Workforce

#### **Measures of Progress (MOPs)** *(Select up to 5 MOPs) (see number of the outcome associated with MoP)*

- **Required**
  - Changes in number of new tools developed (1)
  - Changes in the technical assistance supports provided: total sessions and time (3)
  - Changes in the use of counseling and coaching from service providers (3)
- **Optional**
  - Changes in number of business owners living on the income generated by their business (2)
  - Changes in financial well-being by increasing access to debt, equity products (2)
  - Changes in revenue for small businesses following program services (2)
  - Changes in knowledge of financial management for business operations(3)
  - Changes in employees accumulating assets through shared ownership (4)

Applicants should identify up to 3 Outcomes and up to 5 MOPs that will be tracked during the grant period, contributing to the long-term objectives of the initiative.

## **Priority Strategies and Activities**

We Rise Together seeks to support innovative initiatives that address the following priority strategies. While these two strategies are prioritized, We Rise Together welcomes creative and emerging approaches that applicants feel would effectively support sustainable economic growth within underinvested communities. Proposals should clearly demonstrate how the proposed project contributes to the overall mission of equitable economic recovery.

1. **Technical Assistance and Capital for Mid-Stage Businesses:** Grants in this area will provide targeted technical assistance and capital to mid-stage businesses positioned for growth. Activities may include:
  - Designing and facilitating knowledge-building opportunities that blend consulting, coaching, training, leadership development, or mentorship. These learning opportunities should be concise and highly focused, offering tailored support and training designed to address the unique needs and challenges faced by business owners. Business owners should be equipped with practical strategies and actionable insights to drive growth and success in their businesses.
  - Providing specialized technical assistance (e.g., financial planning, digital marketing, legal, licensing, operational strategy) to enhance business scalability.
  - Supplying direct capital for critical scaling expenses, such as facility upgrades, equipment, inventory expansion, and hiring.
2. **Support for Worker-Owned Cooperatives (Co-ops):** This area focuses on strengthening cooperative models at any stage — from start-up to established — particularly in underserved industries. The ultimate goal is to enable community wealth-building through shared ownership. Suggested activities may include:
  - Providing technical assistance for cooperative governance, financial management, and business planning.
  - Developing shared infrastructure, such as facilities or equipment, to support co-op operations.
  - Launching awareness campaigns that educate communities about the benefits of worker-owned cooperatives.

## **Grantmaking Criteria**

This grant is a one-time funding opportunity intended to support projects that will yield measurable impact within a 12-month period. Applications should clearly address the following criteria:

1. Applicants must demonstrate a track record of success in business support for mid-stage businesses, cooperative development, or economic development within predominantly Black and Latine communities.
2. Applicants must define what they consider a **"mid-stage business"** and explain how their proposed strategies align with the specific needs of this business stage.
3. Proposals are encouraged to introduce or scale innovative approaches, allowing flexibility in the types of strategies proposed to address economic challenges in the

communities of focus. Applicants should describe their track record in delivering innovative strategies.

4. Applicants should describe their ability to actively involve Chicago business leaders, fostering mentorship and relationship-building opportunities that expand the network of local business owners and enhance their ability to secure new opportunities.
5. Applicants must describe the extent of their network of vetted, culturally competent (i.e., bilingual) business service providers, vendors and consultants.
6. Applicants must provide a clear plan for effectively deploying resources to mid-stage businesses or co-ops effectively within the grant period, with measurable impact indicators.

### **Guidance for Applicants**

Please make sure that your responses **provide sufficient context and detail** to demonstrate alignment with the evaluation criteria outlined in this RFP. Reviewers will assess applications based on these criteria, and responses should clearly demonstrate how the proposed work meets the priorities and goals of this grant opportunity.

### **Additional Documents**

Within your application, please include your budget for the work and any MOUs you have with partners identified in the proposal.

### **Grant Amounts Available and Grant Term**

Grants are for up to \$300,000 over 12 months. This is a one-time funding opportunity. Renewals will not be available. For grants that provide passthrough funding to technical assistance advisors or local businesses, please be explicit about the portion of the grant that will be dedicated to passthrough grants.

### **Eligible Applicants**

To be eligible for a grant award, an applicant must:

- Represent that it is, and shall remain through the Grant Period, (i) an organization in good standing, (ii) either a governmental unit or an organization described in Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended (the “Code”), (iii) not a “private foundation” within the meaning of Section 509(a) of the Code, (iv) an organization exempt from taxes under 501(c) of the Code; or for purposes of this grant (v) is fiscally sponsored by a Section 501(c)(3) organization\*.
- Ensure the grant does not benefit any private person or entity in violation of Section 501(c)(3) of the Code.
- Be located within and/or primarily serving residents of Cook County, Illinois.

Applicants without 501(c)(3) status must identify a fiscal sponsor before applying and ask that sponsor to complete and certify an organization profile in The Chicago Community Trust’s grants management system, GrantCentral, at <https://community-cct.force.com/grantcentral/s/> .

### **Ineligible Uses**

Grant funds shall not be used for:

- Electioneering or political activities
- Contributions to any candidate for public office or political committee
- Campaigning on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for public office

### **Application Process**

Applicants must complete their application via GrantCentral, The Chicago Community Trust's online grants management system. To access an application, grant seekers must log into GrantCentral at <https://community-cct.force.com/grantcentral/s/login/>

Applicants must complete an Organization Profile, which is on the last tab within their GrantCentral account. If the Organization Profile was completed for a previous funding opportunity, it must be reviewed and, if needed, updated and certified prior to application submission.

The Trust will not consider late or incomplete letters of intent (LOIs) or full applications. Applicants may receive a site visit (in person or virtual), telephone call, or other communication from foundation staff as part of the application review process.

Late or incomplete LOIs or Full Applications will not be considered. Applicants may receive a site visit, telephone call or other communication from foundation staff as part of the application review process.

Applications are due March 13th, 2025. Virtual site visits/interviews will be during April 28 - May 16th, 2025 (and possibly extended to the last week of May). Final decisions are August 21, 2025.

## **Evaluation and Learning**

The Trust is committed to achieving our long-term goals and outcomes in collaboration with stakeholders and partners. We are developing outcome measures that inform progress toward our collective mission to strengthen the Chicago region. Specifically, the outcomes track progress towards the Trust's strategic goal of increasing household wealth through building income and individual and community assets in underinvested communities. The specific outcomes you select should be based on why you think the project or strategy will lead to the anticipated result or long-term change outlined in the request for proposal (i.e., your theory of change). After you identify the aligned outcomes, you will select specific, time-limited measures of progress. These provide measurable and reportable evidence that a proposed project or organization has effectively achieved – or is on the path to achieving - its objectives. They can be measured during the grant period, contribute to your longer-term outcomes, and align with the Trust's strategic priorities. For shorter-term grants (one year), these outcomes may not be achieved during the project's duration. For each measure of progress, you will identify your baseline, target, data collection approach, and the type of data (qualitative and quantitative). If awarded a grant, you will update the information with actuals to describe progress toward your target. In addition to what you share through site visits, convenings and reporting, we will use this information to inform our collective understanding of progress and challenges to inform next steps.

We encourage grant applicants to identify a limited number of outcomes (1-2) and related measures of progress (3-5 across all outcomes) to those directly aligned with the RFP and your work.

Sharing successes or challenges in achieving measures of progress is critical to our collective learning, decision-making and impact. We recognize there could be challenges to implementing any grant, many of which are not under your control and may prevent you from achieving your targets. However, learning from these challenges and successes is integral to the Trust's learning and impact aims.

Potential grant recipients who are new to developing metrics or work plans or want to learn more about developing measures of progress can contact [learning@cct.org](mailto:learning@cct.org). **Collection of**

## **Collection of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Demographic Data**

The Chicago Community Trust serves a wide variety of constituents and organizations. As such, we collect organizational demographic data to inform us about our potential and current grant recipients' diverse, representative and inclusive staffing practices. This data helps us ensure that the organizations we fund are representative of the communities we serve. Therefore, your Organization Profile should provide demographic data on your organization's board, leadership, staff, and volunteers to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives of impacted communities

## **Contact Information**

For questions regarding this RFP, please contact:

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Christen Wiggins  
We Rise Together: For an Equitable & Just Recovery & Community Wealth Team  
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### **Information Session**

We invite all interested applicants to attend an **Information Session** to learn more about the RFP, ask questions, and gain clarity about the application process.

**Date:** February 5, 2025

**Time:** 1:00 PM CST

**Location:** Zoom

**Zoom Link:**

<https://chicagocommunitytrust.zoom.us/j/87295298252?pwd=3lGEkiYltqttHhqCu9Lwt2dXbXLaP.L.1>

**Meeting ID: 872 9529 8252**

**Password: 112285**

Participation in the information session is encouraged but not required. A recording of the session will be made available upon request.