

USI CDFI Bootcamp & Challenge

Frequently Asked Questions



Answers to the questions we hear most often. Program dates and details may change — your USI staff member and the CDFI team can always confirm the latest.

About the Program

What is the USI CDFI Bootcamp & Challenge?

An accelerator-style program that helps resident business owners grow their for-profit business. Across five sessions you'll strengthen your entrepreneurial mindset, sharpen your business model, and build a pitch that's ready for potential seed funding — graduating with a USI Small Business Certificate.

Who is USI?

Urban Strategies, Inc. is a national non-profit that partners with communities to advance people-centered, place-based solutions. The bootcamp is offered through USI and its CDFI team.

Is there a cost to participate?*

No. The program is free for accepted participants.

**Please note: Business registration may involve licensing, permit, or other required fees. USI CDFI will provide technical assistance to help entrepreneurs understand and navigate the registration process.*

Is the program virtual or in person?

The bootcamp is delivered virtually, so you can join from home. The pitch competition may be in person or hybrid — your market will share those details.

Which communities can take part?

Norfolk, VA; Baltimore, MD; Sacramento, CA; and St. Louis, MO.

Who Can Apply

Who is eligible?

Adults 18 or older who live in a participating USI community, own a for-profit business that is already legally formed (LLC, S-Corp, C-Corp, or DBA), and plan to operate in that community.

Do I need a registered business to apply?

No. Your business does not need to be legally registered when you apply. However, you must be willing to work with USI staff to complete your business registration before the Pitch Competition.

Can a non-profit apply?

No. The program is for for-profit businesses only.

I have a business idea but haven't formed a business yet. Can I apply?

Yes. You'll need to work with USI staff to register your business before the Pitch Competition.

Are any businesses not allowed?

Cannabis, gaming, and adult-entertainment businesses are not eligible, nor are ventures whose main purpose is covering existing debt. Family members of USI employees or competition judges are also not eligible.

What will I need to provide?

Proof of business formation (such as Articles of Organization/Incorporation, a DBA registration, or a business license), and a signed photo/media release.

Time and What You'll Learn

How long is the program?

Four once-weekly sessions of 60–90 minutes, plus a dedicated pitch-training session. The full program runs over about 2.5 months.

How much time will I spend outside of sessions?

Roughly 30–60 minutes of self-paced work each week, with optional office hours for questions and feedback.

What topics does the curriculum cover?

Entrepreneurial mindset and resilience; understanding your customers; your value proposition; ensuring your legal structure fits your tax situation; revenue, costs, and funding; and building your business case and pitch.

Do I earn anything for completing the program?

Yes — a USI Small Business Certificate.

Applying and Selection

How do I apply?

Complete the application, a short intake form. Your USI staff member can help you fill it out.

When is the deadline, and when will I hear back?

Applications are open through Saturday, September 5, 5:00 PM EST. Selected residents are notified by Friday, September 18.

When does the program start?

The program begins in late-September, once selections are complete.

How are participants chosen?

Selection is based on your demonstrated commitment and the viability of your business.

Is there anything I need to do before the first session?

Yes — complete the USI Business Success Portal modules and one technical-assistance consultation before the program begins.

The Pitch and Prizes

Is the bootcamp mandatory?

Yes — participation in the bootcamp is mandatory. Participants must attend at least 80% of the bootcamp (4 of 5 sessions) to remain eligible for the Pitch Challenge. Participants who attend all five sessions (100%) will earn extra points toward their Pitch Challenge score.

Do I have to compete in the pitch?

Pitch preparation is part of the program for everyone. Actually competing on pitch day is optional.

What is the prize?

One winner in each market earns a \$50,000 prize to launch or grow their business.

How can I use prize funds?

Prize funds follow the budget you build during the sessions, so they're tied directly to your own business plan.

Could winning affect my public benefits?

The award is made to the business, not to you personally. If you receive public benefits, talk with your USI contact early so you understand how it may apply to your situation.

Still have questions?

Talk with your USI staff member, or reach the USI CDFI team:

Phone (314) 325-9736 Email usi-cdfi@usi-inc.org

Program dates and details are subject to change. This document is provided for general information.

[Apply Now Here](#)