

**CITY OF BURLINGTON**  
**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANT - 2022 APPLICATION**

*Application must be no more than 12 total pages (including cover page) with 12-point font.*

Project Name: **Small Business Equity Project**

Project Location / Address: 255 South Champlain Street Suite 8, Burlington VT 05401

Applicant Organization / Agency: Mercy Connections, Inc.

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**CDBG Funding Request: \$65,000**

**Total Estimated Program/Project Cost: \$338,468**

**Project start date:** (choose one) July 1st, 2022  or before July 1st, 2022, if before please indicate the desired start date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Development:** (choose one)  Economic Development  Affordable Housing  
 Public Facilities/Improvements

**Public Service:** (choose one)  Early Childhood Ed/Childcare  Youth Services  Health  
 Covid response  Economic Opportunity  Housing and Homelessness

**1. Type of Organization**

- Local Government  Non-Profit Organization (please provide copy of your  
 For-Profit Organization IRS 501(c)(3) tax exemption letter)  
 Faith-Based Organization  Institution of Higher Education

**Certification**

To the best of my knowledge and belief, data in this proposal are true and correct.

I have been duly authorized to apply for this funding on behalf of this agency.

I understand that this grant funding is conditioned upon compliance with federal CDBG regulations.

I further certify that no contracts have been awarded, funds committed or construction begun on the proposed program, and that none will be prior to issuance of a Release of Funds by the Program Administrator.



\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Authorized Official

Lisa Falcone

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Authorized Official

Executive Director

January 10, 2022

Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## ***I. Demonstrated Need***

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### **1. What is the need/opportunity being addressed by this program/project and how does that contribute to CDBG's national objectives? \***

The **Small Business Equity Project** addresses the CDBG national objective of “facilitating economic development through the establishment, stabilization, and expansion of microenterprises.” Small business development is a proven strategy to move people out of poverty; however, Vermont is not sharing in this success. According to the Census Statistics of US Businesses, Vermont's new business startup rate falls below the national average. According to the Census Business Dynamic Series, only 48% of Vermont's business startups remain open five years or more. We have a unique opportunity to expand our business development education programming to support underserved entrepreneurs as they start or expand successful businesses that will stand the test of time.

## ***II. Program/Project Design***

### **1. Give us a short summary (2 sentences) that describe the program/project.**

The **Small Business Equity Project** delivers an integrated model of high-quality entrepreneurial education to support the launch or strengthening of small businesses, with special focus on needs of underserved populations such as women-identified and BIPOC-identified individuals, immigrants and unemployed or underemployed people. It provides business and professional development support and training in ways that meet participants' unique needs and removes barriers to their success.

### **2. Explain why the program activities are the right strategies to use to achieve the intended outcomes. Why is the program designed the way it is? (cite evidence, best practices, or community input)\***

Mercy Connections has a long and proven track record of creating access for marginalized populations in adult learning and entrepreneurial training. For the last 20 years, Mercy Connections has been advancing the self-empowerment and self-sufficiency of female-identified entrepreneurs, women coming out of incarceration, and people from all walks of life seeking to improve their lives. The **Small Business Equity Project** builds on this track record to deliver entrepreneurial education and skill-building to groups traditionally excluded from the business world, including women and adults with different abilities, immigrants, migrants and refugees, and Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC).

Mercy Connections is already a go-to resource for the Project's target audiences for basic education, literacy, English and U.S. Citizenship preparation services. Students have told us that they want to expand their learning with business development education and skill building. Interviews with recent small business course graduates who identify as People of Color revealed that language access, varied content delivery, individualized support, and on-demand learning are ways to improve our programming and broaden access. Based on participant input and best practices, the **Small Business Equity Project** offers training that includes critical support, such as language tutors, increasing the likelihood of participant success.

Burlington's efforts to support racial equity, inclusion and belonging, along with the input of our participants inspired the design of the Project to meet a burgeoning equity gap for business development and ownership in light of COVID-19 disruptions. Based on this input, offerings will take place online and in-person to accommodate working individuals and to keep participants safe during the continued pandemic. We will employ strategies to achieve language accessibility, support foreign born students to navigate American systems, create identity and industry-specific learning environments, and innovate current course designs for a variety of learning styles. We make scholarships and payment plans available through our partnership with the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC).

**3. How will this program/project contribute to the City's anti-poverty strategy? If this activity is to respond to COVID-19, please also describe how this activity prepares or responds to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.**

According to CEDO's Consolidated Plan, "As the state's largest city, Burlington must continue to be an economic engine...to support low-income residents in business ownership through entrepreneurial training (p. NA4)." The **Small Business Equity Project** will contribute to the City's anti-poverty strategy by training and empowering residents, regardless of income, to establish, grow, and expand small businesses. This investment will support the CDBG purpose of "Expanded Economic Opportunity," including to "address community development needs... [for] establishment, stabilization and expansion of small businesses (including micro-business) (NA3)." It addresses Goal 8, Support Microenterprises, with a focus on "women, refugees and businesses... (AP157)" and "increase employment/economic opportunities (SP117)" through supporting micro-enterprises (EO 1.1). The **Small Business Equity Project** helps retain and create jobs (EO 1.2) and contributes to Priority Need 8, "Reducing Barriers to Economic Opportunities." To respond to the pandemic, classes and workshops have been moved to a virtual space as much as is practicable, and we offer pandemic-related workshops and resources to program participants. We continually update our risk management curriculum to better plan for and mitigate the impacts of COVID-19.

**4. How do you use community and/or participant input in planning the program design and activities?\***

Mercy Connections actively assesses relevance and quality in all of our programming. We solicit continuous feedback from program participants, instructors, volunteers, and alumni through formal surveys and interviews as well as informally through individual interactions and group dialogue. Our strategic planning for the **Small Business Equity Project**, including an analysis of existing services and interviews with program participants, identified gaps in current community offerings; we fill these gaps with a unique program design.

### ***III. Proposed Outcomes***

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**1. What are the intended outcomes for this project/program? How are people meant to be better off as a result of participating?**

The **Small Business Equity Project's** primary outcome is that participants gain the knowledge, skills, competence, and insight to make informed decisions about launching, owning, and/or expanding a business. A secondary outcome is development of the skills needed to successfully participate in entrepreneurial education thereby improving financial stability and ultimately

achieving economic self-sufficiency. New businesses owned by people traditionally excluded from business ownership will improve Vermont's business startup rate, grow the local economy, and increase equity within our community.

**2. List your goals/objectives, activities to implement and expected outcomes (# of units, # of individuals, etc.) Only list CDBG-funded services to be offered.**

**Goal #1: Increase access to business and economic opportunity for underserved Burlington residents.**

Activities

1. Offer comprehensive, accessible educational programs to addresses barriers to participation in the local economy and beyond.
2. Leverage existing partnerships for continuous program improvements and outreach.
3. Facilitate connections to resources and professional networks.

Expected Outcomes

- 73 Burlington participants attend programs.
- 85% of participants take concrete steps toward greater self-sufficiency.
- At least 90% of participants gain confidence and build supportive relationships to support increased self-sufficiency.

**Goal #2: Participants make informed decisions to start or grow a business through planning, coaching and self-reflection.**

Activities:

1. Deliver 4 cycles of **Idea to Action**, an 8-hour introductory business class for aspiring entrepreneurs to create a clear vision and action plan.
2. Deliver 2 cycles of **Start Up**, an intensive, semester-long business planning course resulting in a formal business plan.
3. Provide one-on-one and small group coaching/support to entrepreneurs.
4. Provide pathways to self-employment for people with significant life challenges via 2 cycles of **Mercy Marketplace**, an 8-week program to develop arts and crafts vendors-in-training.

Expected Outcomes

- 95% of Idea to Action participants decide if self-employment or business ownership is the right choice for them; 40% select a business idea to pursue.
- 90% of Start Up participants complete business plans; 11% decide not to pursue a business but apply new insights to their current position/life strategy; 33% of participants start a business within one year, 56% start businesses within 2-5 years.
- 100% of Mercy Marketplace participants earn income selling handcrafts and artwork at the Mercy Marketplace event; 36% plan to participate in additional craft fairs.

**Goal #3: Participants develop technical skills and knowledge to navigate business ownership in Vermont**

Activities

1. Provide 2 cycles of **English Language Learning** for non-native speakers to improve their access to professional and business development.
2. Deliver 10 accessible trainings to meet varied needs, including language.

Expected Outcomes

- 90% participants gain increased knowledge of self-employment.
- 85% English language learners increase skills for sector-specific fields of work.

## IV. Impact / Evaluation

1. How do you assess whether/how program participants are better off? Describe how you assess project/program outcomes; your description should include: what type of data, the method/tool for collecting the data, from whom you collect data, and when it is collected.\*

Mercy Connections evaluates program efficacy in a Results-Based Accountability (RBA) framework to analyze quantifiable and qualitative data on program delivery and impact, participant satisfaction, and expected outcomes. We are successful when participants complete deliverables such as business plans, gain new business and personal management skills, access new resources, develop meaningful and supportive relationships, and feel more economically self-sufficient and financially empowered.

- Type of Data: Participant outcomes (business ownership/capitalization; income, career, financial mobility/stability; program satisfaction). Participant changes in knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, circumstances, and sense of belonging.
- Method/Tools: Program applications, student progress records, surveys, interviews, attendance records, and business plan assessments.
- From Whom: Program participants, instructors, volunteers, alumni.
- When: Pre- and post-activity surveys, mid-way assessments, quarterly outcome reports.

2. How successful has the project/program been during the most recent reporting year for your CDBG project? Report the number of beneficiaries you intended to serve with which activities (as noted in your last Attachment A) and your final outcomes (as noted on your Attachment C) from June 2021 (or June 2020). For non-CDBG participants – report on your achievements from the previous year.

### Attachment A, 2020 Application

Total #	# low/mod owners
53	43

In the 2020-2021 grant year, our intention was to serve 53 Burlington residents in a project that had a smaller focus than our current proposal. We were pleased to serve 31 Burlington residents per year. This was disrupted by the pandemic, as we were forced to close our education center in March 2020. Many participants shifted their focus to family and other obligations. Educational programming pivoted to online within weeks, but class participation dropped during the fourth quarter.

	Total # of Owners / Persons Assisted	Result of Assistance: # of New Businesses	Result of Assistance: # of Businesses Expanded	# Owners / Persons at or under 30% AMI	# Owners / Persons between 30% and 50% AMI	# Owners / Persons between 50% and 80% AMI	# Owners / Persons above 80% AMI
Cumulative	31	20	1	13	6	5	3
NRSA Persons / Businesses**	21	0	0	11	4	3	3

## ***V. Experience / Organizational Capacity***

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### **1. What is your agency's mission, and how do the proposed activities fit with your mission?**

Mercy Connections' mission is to deliver education, mentoring, entrepreneurship, and community opportunities to people in life transition. We nurture self-sufficiency by empowering participants to develop new insights, education, community, networks, and life plans. At its heart, it is a mission of social justice and equity. At Mercy Connections, an individual can find support in each phase of their life journey as they navigate barriers and find opportunities. The **Small Business Equity Project** is designed to provide access to economic opportunity and personal empowerment for groups of people who are traditionally locked out of entrepreneurship. Through small business education courses and community building, this project generates self-sufficiency, empowerment, and a sense of belonging.

### **2. Explain how your agency has the capacity to carry out the proposed activity (i.e. staff qualifications, years of experience related to this type of activity, etc.)\***

The Women's Small Business Program (WSBP), a trailblazer in women's entrepreneurship, has been moving Burlington residents out of poverty through self-employment since 1989. In 2021, Mercy Connections took over the program from Trinity College and continues to expand and diversify its offerings. Program graduates are significant contributors to the local business landscape and the Burlington economy.

The Director holds an MBA in Managing for Sustainability, is trained in RBA, racial justice, and restorative justice. She has owned her consulting practice for the past 7 years and taught in the WSBP for four years. Instructors are small business owners and experienced teachers. In 2014, Mercy Marketplace was developed as an outgrowth of WSBP to support those who were not yet ready for a full-semester business course but wanted a market for their crafts. The Marketplace Coordinator is a WSBP graduate who operates her own business. Our most recent effort, informed by the work of the City's Racial Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Department, is to more closely integrate our classes for New Americans and our entrepreneurship programs. We have delivered English Language Learning (ELL) programs for 11 years. Our Education and Equity Coordinator, who helps lead this effort, holds a Master's Degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages and has been teaching ELL for 34 years. There is also value inherent in the breadth of ages, stages, and experiences of our agency leadership; each is a role model of how to successfully overcome barriers and continue to navigate life and family circumstances.

### **3. What steps has your organization/board taken in the past year to address racial equity, inclusion, and belonging internally? What new commitments have been made to address racial equity, inclusion, and belonging internally in the year ahead?**

In January 2021, the annual board and staff retreat was dedicated to advancing Mercy Connections as a diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization. Expert Stephen Graves facilitated a process to recommit to our operating assumption: "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) are integral to Mercy Connections and need to be recognized and supported in an authentic manner."

Over the past year, we held conversations with small businesses about race and justice with two diversity consultants who are alumni of our program. We recruit and support women of color in starting and operating small businesses. Our mission is grounded in the practice of establishing classroom communities where people feel a sense of belonging. We offer ELL, Citizenship test preparation and leadership programs to advance opportunities for immigrants, refugees, and migrants our community. We intentionally encourage people of diverse backgrounds and ethnicity to participate. More than 30% of our Education Program participants are BIPOC and we intend to continue to increase this number. Our board is 20% BIPOC, and we are committed and actively working to increase the diversity of our board members, employees, and volunteers. Additionally, we have hired two new staff directors who are both DEI facilitators and experts.

4. Have you received Federal or State grant funds in the past three years?  Yes  No

5. Were the activities funded by these sources successfully completed?  Yes  No  
 \_N/A. If No, please explain:

**VI. Proposed Low & Moderate Income Beneficiaries**

1. Will the program solely serve a specific group of people? **NO**

2. a. For your proposed project, please estimate how the **Burlington residents** will break out into the following income categories during the total grant period. Use the Income Table at <https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/CEDO/2021-HUD-Income-Limits>

Service / Activity	Unduplicated Total # of Burlington HH / Persons to be Served	# Extremely Low-Income (30% median)	# Very Low-Income (50% median)	# Low-Income (80% median)	# Above Income Limits (above 80% median)
English Language Learning	13	8	3	2	0
Technical knowledge workshops/training/ events	20	5	6	6	3
Intro to business courses	15	4	5	5	1
Intensive business planning courses	8	1	3	3	1
Coaching	5	1	2	1	1
Mercy Marketplace	12	8	2	1	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>7</b>

b. All CDBG grantees serving limited clientele will be required to use CEDO's **CDBG Beneficiary Self-Certification** form to collect beneficiary data including race, ethnicity, annual income, and family size. Is your organization willing and prepared to add this documentation to the intake process for your CDBG funded program by July 1, 2022?

Not Serving Limited Clientele

## ***VII. Commitment to Equity, Inclusion and Belonging***

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- 1. Who is the project/program designed to benefit? Describe the project/program's target population, citing (if relevant) specific age, gender, income, community/location, race or ethnicity, or other characteristic of the people this program is intended to serve. How do you select and reach your target population?**

The primary beneficiaries of the **Small Business Equity Project** are entrepreneurial, extremely low-to-moderate income people. Historically our students have come to a crossroads in their lives, or are in the startup phase of their business, and see entrepreneurial education as a strategy to achieve a more stable life. Most are unemployed, under-employed, or seeking advancement in employment. Many rely on economic benefits through the State of Vermont or, if they do not qualify for public assistance, struggle to make ends meet while living on the "benefits cliff." We intend to better serve more diverse participants, including more people who are female-identified, BIPOC, low-income, newly immigrated, LGBTQ+ or those who face significant life or learning challenges. In addition to referrals from past participants and strategic marketing, we reach our target population through an extensive referral network including nonprofit service providers and municipal and state economic development and benefit service departments.

- 2. Describe the steps you take to ensure the project/program is accessible, inclusive, addressing racially equity, and culturally appropriate for the target population. \***

Some of the steps we take to ensure accessible programming include: creating regular and ongoing feedback loops with participants to ensure programs meet their needs; highly individualized learning plans for ELL students (developed *with* them to address immediate needs); training for tutors and instructors regarding awareness and sensitivity to cultural differences; diversification of teaching methodologies to meet different learning styles; and adapting complex content into simpler formats at an appropriate level for students.

## ***VIII. Budget / Financial Feasibility***

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- 1. Budget Narrative: Provide a clear description of what you will do with CDBG's investment in the project/program. How will you spend the money? Give specific details.**

CDBG's investment will support salaries of the Project Director, and partial time for the Mercy Marketplace Coordinator and the Education & Equity Coordinator. Funds will be spent for instruction, program planning, equity and inclusion systems, curriculum development, recruitment, enrollment, instructor and volunteer supervision, teaching, student support, and program evaluation. Ongoing base support for this project allows us to keep the program cost-accessible for participants.

- 2. If you plan to pay for staff with CDBG funding, describe what they do in relation to the specific service(s) / activity(ies) in your Project/Program Design.**



Specific Service / Activity	Position/Title	Work Related to CDBG-Funded Activity	# Hours	% CDBG
English Language Learning	Education & Equity Coordinator	Program Delivery	12	12.24%
		Evaluation & Program Planning	4	4.08%
		Recruitment & Enrollment	4	4.08%
		Student Support	8	8.16%
Start Up / Business Planning Courses	Project Director	Teacher Supervision	5	6.63%
		Program Delivery	4	5.30%
		Student Support	6	7.96%
		Recruitment, Enrollment, Alumni Relations	6	7.96%
		Evaluation & Program Planning	6	7.96%
Idea to Action / Intro to Business Classes	Project Director	Student Support	0.5	0.66%
		Program Delivery	1	1.33%
		Recruitment & Enrollment	1	1.33%
		Evaluation & Program Planning	0.5	0.66%
Specialized Business Workshops	Project Director	Program Delivery	2.5	3.31%
		Evaluation & Program Planning	2	2.65%
Coaching	Project Director	Program Delivery	2	2.65%
		Student support	2	2.65%
		Evaluation & Program Planning	0.5	0.66%
Mercy Marketplace	Mercy Marketplace Coordinator	Program Delivery	0.8	3.09%
		Evaluation & Program Planning	1.2	4.63%
		Recruitment & Enrollment	0.4	1.54%
		Student Support	0.8	3.09%

b. All CDBG grantees that use CDBG funds for salaries must submit timesheets that capture total time and effort of staff members funded with CDBG. These timesheets must record hours worked on CDBG-funded programs, hours worked on non-CDBG funded programs and the corresponding program name/funding source(s). Timecards must include a narrative for all CDBG and non-CDBG funded activities, and must be signed by the employee and supervisor. Does your organization have the ability to implement a timekeeping system for CDBG funded staff that meets these requirements by July 1, 2022?  Yes  No  Not funding salaries

### 3. Project Budget

Line Item	CDBG Funds	Other	Total
Direct Personnel	\$65,000	\$160,740	\$225,740
Marketing	\$0	\$15,500	\$15,500
Supplies & Resource Materials	\$0	\$11,500	\$11,500
Scholarships	\$0	\$12,000	\$12,000
Marketplace Space Rental	\$0	\$4,000	\$4,000
Technology	\$0	\$7,000	\$7,000
Admin/Overhead	\$0	\$62,728	\$62,728
<b>Total Project Expense</b>	<b>\$65,000</b>	<b>\$273,468</b>	<b>\$338,468</b>

**4. Funding Sources**

	Program/Project		Agency	
	Current	Projected	Current	Projected
CDBG	\$50,000	\$65,000	\$50,000	\$65,000
State (specify) Department of Corrections	-	-	\$126,000	\$175,000
Federal (specify) - N/A	-	-	-	-
United Way - N/A	-	-	-	-
Private (specify)				
Key Bank Foundation	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$10,000
People's United	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000
TD Charitable Foundation	\$15,000	\$30,000	\$15,000	\$30,000
Vermont Women's Fund	\$7,000	-	\$7,000	-
Hearst Foundation	\$2,000	\$2,000	\$2,000	\$2,000
Mercy Connections Annual Fund	\$89,870	\$160,343	\$530,000	\$600,000
Program Income	\$66,450	\$66,125	\$61,500	\$66,125
Other ( <u>specify</u> ) Grants – other Investments			\$198,000	\$173,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$245,320</b>	<b>\$338,468</b>	<b>\$1,004,500</b>	<b>\$1,126,125</b>

**5. Of the total program/project cost, what percentage will be financed with CDBG?**

$$\frac{\$65,000}{\text{CDBG Funding}} \div \frac{\$338,468}{\text{Total Program/Project Costs}} = 19.2\% \text{ Percentage}$$

**6. Of the total program/project cost, what would be the total cost per person?**

$$\frac{\$338,468}{\text{Total Program/Project Cost}} \div \frac{73}{\text{\# Total Proposed Beneficiaries}} = \$4,637 \text{ Cost Per Person}$$

$$\frac{\$65,000}{\text{Total Amount of CDBG Funding}} \div \frac{66}{\text{\# Total Proposed CDBG Beneficiaries}} = \$985 \text{ Cost Per Person CDBG Investment}$$

**7. Why should CDBG resources, as opposed to other sources of funding, be used for this project?**

Trinity College and Burlington’s CEDO began the Women’s Small Business Program (WSBP) over 30 years ago. The **Small Business Equity Project** preserves CEDO’s legacy of collaborating with and investing in locally-grown, successful entrepreneurship programs to empower Burlington residents toward greater success. The **Small Business Equity Project** aligns with both the CDBG goals for economic development and the mission of Burlington’s Racial Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Department: “promoting racial equity and inclusion throughout the City of Burlington both internally and externally through engagement, facilitation, and education.” For these reasons, a CDBG investment is a natural fit.

**8. Describe your use of community resources, including volunteers. Include any resources not listed in your budget. Will CDBG be used to leverage other resources?\***

Mercy Connections engages over 150 volunteers throughout the organization. The business programs organize 25 expert volunteers who review business plans and serve as guest speakers. Twice a year, business specialists from organizations such as CEDO, SBA, SBDC, CVOEO, Consumer Assistance Program, Opportunities Credit Union, local attorneys, WBON, CWE, Community Capital of Vermont, SCORE, the State of Vermont AG's Office and Department of Taxes volunteer their time to share their expertise to support entrepreneurs. The Center for Women and Enterprise conducts registration and provides space to deliver some of our business workshops. The University of Vermont provides access to its research computer software. Mercy Connections continues to be mindful of the entrepreneurial landscape by consulting with relevant stakeholders. CEDO's endorsement of our work through CDBG funding strengthens our leverage politically and financially to attract new funding sources.

***IX. Collaboration/Efficiency***

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**1. Give 1 or 2 examples of key successful collaboration(s) between your program/project and another agency/program/group to address the needs of the people you serve.**

The Program Director co-presents a "Business Plan Basics" class, among other occasional business workshops, alongside Center for Women and Enterprise staff, providing multi-layered services to potential business owners. WSBP also collaborates with At the Root on Pine Street to present facilitated peer-to-peer discussions such as Funding Opportunities for Small Businesses, Time Management & Work-Life Balance for Entrepreneur, Social Responsibility in Business, and Planning for Year-End Tax Prep. Additionally, we are piloting a new collaboration with the J.S. Munt Family Room to offer tutoring and citizenship preparation classes onsite. This allows our participants to take classes at a location where they are already accessing childcare or other services.

**2. Do identical or similar community programs exist? How does this program complement or collaborate rather than duplicate services? What makes this program unique?**

Our multilayered, home base of entrepreneurship training and supports are well-known to complement the work of SBDC, CVOEO, Generator, and CWE, organizations that also offer entrepreneurship assistance. To avoid duplication, we meet regularly with and occasionally offer workshops collaboratively with these organizations. We are partners with AALV and USCRI on a project to advance U.S. Citizenship and ELL.

The **Small Business Equity Project** provides a comprehensive suite of programs to support entrepreneurs from the skill-building and idea-phase through the first years of business ownership. This encompasses the very first steps to embracing one's entrepreneurial potential, building skills and learning best practices, to writing comprehensive business plans. Once operational, business owners receive coaching, co-working support, and training. A hallmark of this project is facilitating and building a supportive community for professional growth to lessen the isolation of business ownership. Students create personal and professional networks that continue to support them throughout their small business journey.

**3. Provide 1 example of how your agency has become more efficient in achieving your outcomes or managing your project/program.**

To move our business classes online during the pandemic, we established an online learning platform (Mighty Networks) and an online business planning tool (LivePlan) that allow for easier communication between students and instructors as well as 24/7 access to learning materials. In order to maximize application and connection during live virtual classes, all lectures/classes were pre-recorded and can be accessed asynchronously at any time. Many of these tools will continue to enhance accessibility even after the pandemic is over. Our new e-commerce store for the Mercy Marketplace sales event extends the sales period to two weeks versus holding a single day in-person event. Participants experienced the first online sales of their products at a time when they did not have access to direct sales at craft fairs.

***X. Sustainability***

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**1. How will this project have a long-term benefit to the City of Burlington? If this program/project ends, how will that benefit continue?**

Mercy Connections' entrepreneurial programs contribute to the City's revitalization goals through participants who reside in and operate businesses in designated neighborhood revitalization areas. There are at least three alumnae-owned businesses located on or within a block of Church Street, three on Pine Street, and three on North Avenue. Benefits continue far beyond program completion - employers benefit as the City retains program graduates who are skilled workers, and individuals benefit as there are new job opportunities close to where they live.

**3. CDBG funding is intended for new or expanded services. If CDBG funding ends, will the project be able to continue?**

CDBG funds support direct program expenses. If funding ends, participant fees may need to increase, but the project will continue, relying more heavily on marketing to higher income students and utilizing VSAC assistance. That said, Mercy Connections has consistently depended on diverse funding sources to sustain our efforts and we continue to aggressively search for additional funding. The City's investment acts as endorsement and as leverage for engaging other funding sources.

**4. How will you prioritize the proposed project activities if you do not receive the full amount requested?**

Mercy Connections' entrepreneurial programs have a legacy worth preserving and prioritizing. We value our partnership with the City and will do our best to avoid scaling down and limiting access to our programming as we seek alternate funding.