2025 ESO Development Fund
Entrepreneurial Catalyst Grant Guidelines
DISTRIBUTION VERSION

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For information and/or additional details and support, email: startup@winstonsalem.com

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Overview / Goal of the Funds

The ESO Development Fund supports Winston-Salem-based organizations whose core functions directly serve Winston-Salem-based early-stage companies to support the creation of jobs and investment in Forsyth County.

The Fund provides up to $10,000 annually per ESO / applicant to advance operations, programs, or initiatives that strengthen the local entrepreneurial ecosystem. Awards are typically between $5,000 and $10,000.
The Entrepreneurship Committee will determine the annual threshold to be disclosed to applicants.

These are not restricted funds. Funds can NOT be used for: debt servicing, unrelated overhead, or staff bonuses.

Grant Cycle

Phase	Start Date	End Date Duration (Days)	Duration (Days)
Application Period	June 16, 2025	July 3, 2025	18
Application Review & Vetting	July 3, 2025	July 17, 2025	14
Applicants pitch to GWSI Entrepreneurship Committee - TBC	**July 24, 2025**	**July 24, 2025**	**TBD**
Grant Disbursement & Year Start	August 1, 2025	August 1, 2026	365

- Application Period: June 16, 2025 – July 3, 2025 (18 days)
- Application Review & Vetting: July 3, 2025 – July 17, 2025 (14 days)
- Announcement of Grant Recipients: July 24, 2025
- Grant Disbursement & Cycle Start: August 1, 2025 – August 1, 2026 (1 year)

Promotion

- The grant opportunity will be featured on the GWSI website.
- GWSI will run a dedicated social media campaign to promote the grant application.
- Additional promotion includes:
  - One information/help desk session will be held during the June 10th bimonthly Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Ecosystem Meeting.
  - Outreach via the ESO email distribution list, which will be reviewed and discussed before use.

Eligibility & Qualifications

- **Eligible Applicants**
  - Applicants must be either a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization or a for-profit organization (individuals are not eligible) with programs that positively impact early-stage companies to support the creation of jobs and investment in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County area.
  - Preference evaluation will be given to ESOs (Entrepreneurial Support Organization), meaning an entity whose core functions are to consistently support, nurture, and advance early-stage companies, providing resources, programs, and services that foster startup growth, support job creation, and investment in Forsyth County, not as an incidental or one-time effort.
- **Focus**
  - Core activities must cater to Winston-Salem-based idea-stage and/or early-stage companies.
- **Application Restrictions**
  - Only one application is allowed per organization per grant cycle. Multiple submissions will result in disqualification.
  - Applications must be complete, including all required documentation and responses to qualifying questions.
- **Transparency and Accountability**
  - Applicants must provide accurate business formation documents and incorporation dates.
  - Any misrepresentation or failure to comply with the grant terms may result in the revocation of funding and ineligibility for future grants.

Grant Qualifying/Criteria Questionnaire

1. **Does your organization provide services, resources, or programs specifically designed to help entrepreneurs or small businesses start or grow?**
   - ○ Yes
   - ○ No

2. **Is supporting entrepreneurs or small businesses a core part of your mission or operations (not incidental or one-time)?**
   - ○ Yes, what percentage?
   - ○ No

3. **Do you offer any of the following to entrepreneurs or early-stage businesses?** *(Select all that apply.)*
   - ○ Mentorship or coaching
   - ○ Education, training, or workshops
   - ○ Access to funding or investors
   - ○ Physical space (coworking, incubator, maker space, etc.)
   - ○ Networking or community events
   - ○ Legal, financial, or operational advice
   - ○ None of the above

4. **Are your services or programs regularly available (e.g., ongoing, seasonal, or annually repeated), not just one-time events?**
   - ○ Yes, how often
   - ○ No

5. **Do you actively engage with founders, startups, or small businesses through programming, outreach, or partnerships?**
   - ○ Yes - describe types of engagement.
   - ○ No

6. **Is your organization a nonprofit, for-profit, academic institution, government agency, or community initiative?** *(Select one)*
   - ○ Nonprofit
   - ○ For-profit
   - ○ Academic institution
   - ○ Government agency
   - ○ Community or grassroots initiative
   - ○ Other: _____
   - ○ None of the above

Rubric Score / Weight

1. Minimum Grantee Requirements (pass / fail) - *Proposals failing any requirement are removed from scoring.*

Requirement/Guidelines	Why It Matters
Organizational status – 501(c)(3), public institution, or registered company in good standing	Ensures legal/financial accountability
Local impact footprint – primary regional activities (e.g., Winston-Salem/Forsyth Co.)	Keeps dollars in the target economy
Program focus – directly serves entrepreneurs or small businesses (not the general workforce or CSR)	Alignment with economic-development goals
Clear metrics plan – will track jobs created, firms formed, funding raised, etc.	Enables ROI assessment
Diversity & inclusion statement with tactics*	How ecosystem partners are reaching and serving diverse founders*
No outstanding tax liens, litigation, or defaulted grants	Reduces execution risk

* At GWSI, we're all about building an entrepreneurial ecosystem that looks like the community we serve—diverse, inclusive, and accessible to everyone. If your organization shares these values around equity and representation, we'd love to hear how your work supports that.

2. Scoring Rubric (100 points total) - *Score each criterion 0–5 (Poor → Excellent), then multiply by weight/5 for points.*

#	Criterion	Weight	Scoring Guidance
1	**Economic Impact Potential**	25 pts	Projected jobs, business formations, capital attracted, evidence of demand & realistic assumptions
2	**Program Design & Feasibility**	15 pts	Clear objectives, logical activities, an achievable timeline, and qualified staff/mentors
3	**Founder Outcomes & Support Depth**	15 pts	Quality/novelty of services (mentorship, capital access, training), duration & intensity per participant
4	**Equity, Inclusion & Reach**	10 pts	Plans to engage under-represented founders and rural or low-income areas; outreach strategies & targets
5	**Collaboration & Ecosystem Leverage**	10 pts	Partnerships with ESOs, universities, and investors - avoids duplication and build on existing assets
6	**Organizational Capacity & Track Record**	10 pts	Prior program performance, financial health, experienced leadership team
7	**Budget Soundness & Cost-Effectiveness**	10 pts	Transparent, reasonable line-items; $/participant or $/job compares favorably to benchmarks
8	**Sustainability & Funding Diversification**	5 pts	Plan to continue post-grant (earned revenue, sponsors, other grants)

3. Optional Bonus Points (up to +15)

Bonus Area	Points	Rationale
Innovation in service delivery (e.g., AI-driven matching, VR training)	+5	Rewards novel models that the region can showcase
Cross-county or multi-state collaboration	+5	Encourages broader economic-development impact
Submit a 2-minute or less video where applicants advocate for their grant idea/proposal	+5	Offers an opportunity for applicants to bring their own touch to the application

Eligible Activities

Examples from the last application cycle. Initiatives must align with one or more of the following areas:

- **Capacity Building for Operations:** Expanding the organization's ability to serve more founders / early-stage companies. Applications that support the organization's growth and/or increased capacity to serve more founders / early-stage companies will be accepted.

- **Program Development & Deployment:** Recurring, new, or existing educational programs with defined timeframes that directly advance multiple idea/early-stage companies. Most attractive programs will be those that have definitive programming time windows and cater, in a direct manner, to the advancement of multiple idea/early-stage companies.

- **Resource Deployment:** Providing tools or resources (e.g., software) that promote founders / early-stage companies' growth. We define a resource as a tool that an early-stage company can utilize to aid in its growth. For example, an organization adopts and provides a software tool to its respective companies that aids in the improvement of their business development processes and practices.

- **Event Offering:** Events that strengthen the local entrepreneurial community, with strong founders' involvement. The goal of an event must be to provide a space that aids in further cultivating the Winston-Salem / Forsyth County entrepreneurship/small business.

- **Early-Stage Fundraising Support:** Activities that improve founders / early-stage companies' chances of raising capital, including educational offerings and investor awareness events. The types of proposals that we will consider are recurring and, in some way, spotlight or help to improve local early-stage companies' chances of raising capital. An organization can achieve this through educational offerings, events, and programs that augment investor awareness of local early-stage companies.

- **Ecosystem-Wide Marketing:** Marketing efforts that promote both the organization's core activities and the broader Winston-Salem / Forsyth County entrepreneurial ecosystem. This type of proposal should be tailored to an organization's marketing efforts related to its core organizational activities. For example, an organization is seeking to promote its accelerator program to attract more applicants. The secondary requirement is that the marketing efforts must also promote the Winston-Salem / Forsyth County Entrepreneurial Ecosystem.

Application Components & Questions

- Organization Name
- Contact Information (name, email, phone, address)
- The organization's business formation documents
- Organization's date of incorporation
- Organization mission statement
- List of services offered by the organization
- Has the organization applied for this grant in the past?
    - If so, has the organization been granted any amount, and if so, how much
- Name of grant proposal
- Amount of grant funds requested
- Comprehensive description of the activity/initiative and the grant fund usage
- How does the proposal align with the grant's goals and objectives
- Target audience for the initiative
- Number of expected participants in the initiative (if applicable)
- Proposed timeline with key milestones
- Anticipated outcomes & impact
- Budget breakdown (use the grant budget template)
- Two to three metrics the recipient will use to measure the impact of the grant
- One letter of recommendation from a local startup founder (the organization served) and one of the organization's main partners must be included to support the application.
- Optional to score extra points: Create and upload/submit a 2-minute or less video where applicants advocate for their grant idea/proposal

Grant Recipient Reporting Criteria

- Grant recipients must spend the awarded funds by the end of the one-year grant cycle.
- Recipients must submit a one-time report (outline of the report below) no later than one month after the initiative is executed, detailing:
    - **Executive Summary:** A brief overview of the project, including goals, activities, and outcomes.
    - **Use of Funds:** A detailed breakdown of how the grant funds were spent, aligned with the approved budget.
    - **Activities and Accomplishments**: A description of the activities undertaken during the grant period and the key accomplishments achieved.
    - **Impact and Outcomes:** An assessment of the project's impact on Winston-Salem-based early-stage companies, including quantitative and qualitative data.
    - **Metrics**: Report on the two to three metrics the recipient identified in the application to measure the impact of the grant
    - **Challenges and Lessons Learned:** A discussion of any challenges encountered during the project and the lessons learned.
    - **Success Stories:** Include any specific success stories or testimonials from startups that benefited from the initiative.
    - **Photos/Media:** Include photos or other media that showcase the project and its impact (if available).
    - **Program Promotion Reconciliation**: screenshots of social media pages or posts that include the GWSI logo or a shout-out to GWSI for the program support, digital versions/copies of printed materials that demonstrate recognition for the grant.

Disbursement

- Grants are disbursed in ACH, need-based increments over the one-year cycle (TBC).