

Dept. of Workforce Development: Wisconsin's Workforce Innovation Grant will help Kenosha create the next generation of diverse business owners

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KENOSHA, WI. FEB. 1, 2022 – In 2019 when Kenny Harper decided to quit his full-time job to go into business for himself, he just wanted to focus on tax preparation and selling insurance.

And while Harper does do both of those things, it's turned out he spends much of his time at work educating.

"People don't understand how credit works," said Harper, who owns Harper Tax and Financial Literacy Group in Kenosha. "People don't understand how important a budget is."

As a Black business owner, Harper said he believes it's important to help youth get work experience. Working with an area nonprofit, he helped teach financial literacy to a group of 11 to 17-year-olds. When the course was finished, the class had created 12 businesses – all owned by youth under age 18.

Now, using funds from Wisconsin's Workforce Innovation Grant, the city of Kenosha is partnering with a nationally-ranked accelerator program to help more potential entrepreneurs.

"Creating economic prosperity for everyone requires making smart investments in

people and their dreams,” said Missy Hughes, secretary and CEO of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC). “The state’s investment in this partnership between the city of Kenosha and gener8tor will pay off in new diversely-owned businesses and more opportunities for all.”

Hughes and Department of Workforce Development (DWD) Secretary-designee Amy Pechacek took part in a roundtable discussion with entrepreneurs, including Harper, city leaders and gener8tor, the accelerator that will be running the city’s gBETA program.

“Wisconsin’s record-low unemployment and strong labor force participation rate are reasons to celebrate and yet the COVID-19 pandemic continues to exacerbate barriers to employment for many people in our communities,” Pechacek said. “The effort to bring additional training, coaching and entrepreneurial support to Kenosha through gener8tor’s gBETA program promises to advance equity and economic opportunity throughout southeastern Wisconsin.”

In December, Gov. Tony Evers announced the first round of Workforce Innovation Grants awarding up to \$59.5 million to 12 collaborative programs working to solve Wisconsin’s workforce challenges.

Kenosha’s grant, worth up to \$990,000, is being used to bring gener8tor’s gBETA program to the city. The program offers founders training, coaching, networking and opportunities to receive funding. While gBETA is designed to help any entrepreneur, it will focus on reaching founders of color and women.

“The City of Kenosha greatly appreciates the award of a Workforce Innovation Grant that enables us to work with Gener8tor and initiate a gBETA program in Kenosha.” Mayor John Antaramian said. “As we continue our efforts to revitalize Uptown and move toward development of the Kenosha Innovation Neighborhood, this program will reach out to a diverse group of entrepreneurs and lead to increased business start-ups by women and people of color creating opportunity and jobs in our neighborhoods.”

Though the program hasn’t started yet, the community is already excited about it, city leaders say.

“We’ve already received an outpouring of support from Kenosha in getting this program off the ground, and we haven’t even selected a local director yet,” said

Abby Kursel, a partner at Gener8tor. “We are excited to continue to bring opportunity to more startups across the state of Wisconsin, and work collectively with the community to create innovative, long-lasting businesses that can grow into the economic drivers of tomorrow.”

The Workforce Innovation Grants are paid for by \$100 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funds, with a second round of grants expected to be announced later this year.