

Cook County Community Financial Institution (CFI) Capacity Building Grant Program: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. What is the purpose of this grant program?

This grant program provides funding to help community financial institutions (CFIs) in Cook County expand their capacity to support small businesses by (i) increasing financial capacity and/or (ii) enhancing operational capacity.

2. How is 'small business' defined for this grant program?

This program uses the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) definition of a small business, which varies by industry based on factors like number of employees or average annual receipts. You can look up the size standards by NAICS code on the SBA website: [SBA Table of Size Standards](#).

3. Who is eligible to apply?

Organizations must meet all of the following criteria to be eligible:

- Must be one of the following lending entities:
 - Certified Development Corporation (CDC)
 - Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI)
 - Minority Depository Institution (MDI)
 - Small Business Administration (SBA) microlender
 - Other nonprofit lending organization
- Must be a nonprofit entity
- Must have at least two years of lending experience
- Must seek to begin or expand small business lending in Cook County
- Must be in good standing with all relevant regulatory bodies

4. What can the grant be used for?

Funds may be used to:

- Improve **financial capacity**, such as increasing their pool of loans to small businesses, or establishing a loan loss reserve, that directly results in the deployment of more capital to regional small businesses
- Improve **operational capacity**, such as hiring staff, purchasing technology, or obtaining consulting services, to directly support regional small businesses

Applicants may split the funds across both purposes and will outline their proposed use of funds within their applications.

5. Will my organization be held to my outlined use of funds?

If an organization's needs change from what is stated in their applications, the grantee must notify the Bureau of Economic Development immediately at cfigrant.oed@cookcountyil.gov to discuss next steps.

In this event, grantees may adjust how they use the funds, provided the new use still falls within the two eligible categories: financial capacity building or operational capacity building. In this event, any changes must be clearly documented and communicated during the subsequent impact reporting period.

6. How much funding is available? What is the maximum award amount?

The total grant pool is **\$1.4 million** and funded by Cook County. Individual awards may vary based on proposed use and demonstrated need. The maximum award amount will be \$500,000.

7. What is the application timeline?

Milestone	Date
Program launch, application opens	Monday, June 16, 2025
Virtual information session	Wednesday, June 25, 2025; 10am CT
Application deadline	Friday, July 25 2025 at 5pm CT
Grantee selection and notification	Fall 2025
Execution of grant agreement and disbursement of grant award	January 2026
Reporting frequency	Quarterly

8. How do I apply?

1. Complete the [application form](#) and submit by **July 25, 2025 at 5 PM CT**.
2. Separately email required PDF attachments (see list below) to cfigrant.oed@cookcountyil.gov using the file naming conventions provided.
3. Applications will be considered complete when both application form and the attachments are submitted. Applications are due no later than **July 25, 2025, at 5:00 PM CT**. Late submissions will not be considered.
4. Incomplete applications will not be reviewed.

5. If an applicant needs to correct their application, organizations must submit a new application via the application link. However, only the latest application submission will be considered.

9. What documents do I need to submit? What format should these documents be in?

In addition to submitting the online application form, applicants must submit documents separately via email to cfigrant.oed@cookcountyil.gov. Please use the subject line: "YourOrgName - Application Documents" and submit all attachments in **PDF form**. For each required document, use the prescribed file naming format.

Required Documents		
Corresponding Application Question	Required Document	Document File Naming Format
Question 6: Organizational Structure	<u>Organization chart</u> Document with Summary of Roles	OrgName_CFI Grant_Q6
Question 7: Key Personnel	<u>Resumes or brief biographies</u> of those who will be directly involved in managing the grant and implementing the proposed program	OrgName_CFI Grant_Q7
Question 12: Organizational Type	<u>Proof of eligibility tied to organization type</u> Certified Development Company (CDC) <i>Must show at least one of the following:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SBA Certification Letter • Presence on the SBA's Certified Development Company (CDC) directory Community Development Finance Institution (CDFI) <i>Must show at least one of the following:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US Treasury Certification Letter • Presence on the CDFI Fund's directory Minority Depository Institution (MDI) <i>Must show at least one of the following:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FDIC Designation Letter 	OrgName_CFI Grant_Q12

Required Documents		
Corresponding Application Question	Required Document	Document File Naming Format
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence on the FDIC's MDI directory <p>Small Business Administration (SBA) microlender <i>Must show at least one of the following:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentation proving participation in microlender program <p>Presence on the SBA Microlender directory</p> <p>Other nonprofit lending organization <i>Must show at least one of the following:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A certified copy of the organization's certificate of incorporation or similar document that clearly establishes nonprofit status • A statement from a state official of agency certifying nonprofit status <p><i>Must also show at least one of the following:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financials showing last two fiscal year's lending activity • Information about lending programs (e.g. eligibility criteria and loan terms) 	
Question 17: Detailed Use of Funds Narrative	<u>Narrative outlining proposed allocation of the grant</u> with specific line items and estimated costs and intended ways of leveraging the award, if any. Please limit the narrative to 500 words.	OrgName_CFI Grant_Q17
Question 19: Timeline for Implementation	<u>Timeline for implementing proposed plan.</u> including use of funds in the first three months, other key milestones and expected completion date through Q4 2027	OrgName_CFI Grant_Q19

Required Documents		
Corresponding Application Question	Required Document	Document File Naming Format
Application Checklist	Application Checklist Checklist for application submission	OrgName_CFI Grant_AppCheck

10. How will applications be evaluated? What makes a good application?

A panel of external partners with expertise in small business capital needs will review all applications and recommend a proposed list of 3-4 grant recipients to Cook County. The review panel will consider the following factors as part of the review process:

- Proposed use of funds and stated impact
 - Detailed, well-defined plan with clear use of funds for financial, operational, or combined capacity building
 - Clear, data-driven, and feasible impact projections demonstrating significant benefit to small businesses
- Small business alignment
 - Established small business focus primarily observed through products, revenue and employee size of borrowers and split of outstanding loan portfolio
 - Extensive footprint in suburban Cook County and the City of Chicago
 - Staff that speaks multiple languages
- Organizational capacity and track record
 - Default rate
 - Information on underwriting, monitoring, and risk mitigation practices
 - Number of staff members working directly with small businesses
 - Ability to deliver business advising services
 - Experience managing philanthropic and government grants
- Data infrastructure and reporting capacity
 - Demonstrates strong ability to track the program's reporting requirements

11. What happens if my organization is selected for an award?

All applicants will be notified of their status in Fall 2025. Applicants that are awarded will enter into a contract with Cook County that will detail the grant terms and scope of services.

12. When does the grant award need to be used by?

Grantees must use at least **10% of their award within the first six months** of receiving the grant. “Use” is defined broadly and generally encompasses all use cases that result in an increase in small business lending and/or business advising to small businesses.

For example, allocating funds to a loan loss reserve is considered a valid use, as the backstop incentivizes small business lending, even if the funds are not immediately spent to cover loan losses. Grantees must detail how funds will be used in the application process and specify how funds are being utilized as part of their required impact reporting.

13. Are grantees allowed to keep the interest earned on the grant award?

Grantees must track and use any interest accrued on advance payments solely for eligible purposes outlined in the Grant Agreement. The value of any unused interest and advance payment balances must be reported to Cook County on a quarterly basis. All unspent funds and accrued interest must be returned to the County within 90 days of the agreement’s end date or within 90 days of termination, whichever comes first.

14. Will there be any circumstances under which awarded grants might need to be returned?

The Bureau of Economic Development reserves the right to require repayment of all or part of the funds if the recipient engages in conduct that includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- A grantee provides false or fraudulent information in their application or impact reporting
- A grantee fails to abide by the impact reporting requirements
- A grantee fails to use the award in a manner consistent with the permitted use of funds
- A grantee fails to use at least 10% of their award in the first six months of disbursement
- A grantee fails to communicate changes to their use of funds as outlined in their application

Grantees must return any unspent funds to Cook County by the end of the final impact reporting period which concludes on November 30, 2027. If the agreement ends or is terminated for any reason, all unused funds and accrued interest must be returned within 90 days of the agreement’s end date.

15. Where can I learn more or ask questions?

Please register for the **June 25 information session** via [this link](#) or email your questions to CFIgrant.oed@cookcountyil.gov.

16. Do nonprofits qualify as small businesses as borrowers?

Nonprofits are not eligible to receive loans supported by these grant funds. This program uses the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) definition of a small business, which varies by industry based on factors like number of employees or average annual receipts. You can look up the size standards by NAICS code on the SBA website: [SBA Table of Size Standards](#).

17. Are CDFI banks with for-profit status eligible to apply?

For-profit organizations are ineligible for the grant. To be eligible, organizations must meet all of the following eligibility criteria:

- Must be one of the following lending entities:
 - Certified Development Corporation (CDC)
 - Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI)
 - Minority Depository Institution (MDI)
 - Small Business Administration (SBA) microlender
 - Other nonprofit lending organization
- Must be a nonprofit entity
- Must have at least two years of lending experience
- Must seek to begin or expand small business lending in Cook County
- Must be in good standing with all relevant regulatory bodies

18. Are you only looking for locally-based institutions or are national organizations able to apply?

Your organization does not need to be based in Cook County, but your organization must seek to begin or expand small business lending in Cook County, along with meeting the other eligibility requirements.

19. Can you use funds for a combination of capacity building?

Yes, funds can be used to increase both financial capacity and/or operational capacity. Grantees have discretion in determining the allocation towards either use.

20. Are there specific timelines or conditions related to when the grant funds must be used or deployed?

10% of the grant award must be used within six months of receiving the grant. All funds must be used by the end of the grant term on 11/30/2027.

21. Is there a minimum or maximum grant \$ ask?

The maximum award size will be \$500,000. The evaluation committee will make a determination on the appropriate award size for each awardee based on application response.

22. How will funds be disbursed?

Grantees will receive the full grant award in a direct disbursement from the County shortly after executing the grant agreement.

23. What are the program reporting requirements?

Metrics for this grant program may include but are not limited to:

- Grant Utilization
 - Use of Funds to date, broken down by specific use cases
- Impact of Financial Capacity Building
 - Growth in capital deployed to small businesses
 - Typical small business profile (sector, geography, size, demographics) receiving said capital
- Impact of Operational Capacity Building
 - Growth in small business advising capacity
 - Typical small business profile (sector, geography, size, demographics) receiving said advising
 - Other impacts of organization-specific operational enhancements