

# ASPIRE!

## Facts

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ASPIRE! is a program funded by a \$92,000 Rural Business Development grant from the US Department of Agriculture with additional funding from NEKCA and local contributions, designed to engage and empower women business owners of Vermont's Northeast Kingdom: Caledonia, Essex and Orleans counties.

ASPIRE! creates a process for women entrepreneurs who wish to start or expand their small business with technical assistance, consultants, services, or training. The women will present their proposals to a panel of business and professional women volunteers from the community, who will choose the winners. Each winner will have an account established from which expenses in her plan will be drawn. Excluding equipment, all kinds of technical support and expertise can be purchased, or training obtained to be able to do it for oneself. Services include:

- Training for license completion
- Development of a business plan
- Consultation in digital marketing strategy
- Technical assistance in website design
- Accounting software
- Trade show display design and construction
- Product design and development TA
- On-line appointment booking system development
- Tuition for computer training
- Packaging design
- Advertising campaign development
- Brochure design
- Facebook business page development
- Business education tuition

Women who are selected to receive the ASPIRE! awards will also be assigned to a team of business and professional women who will volunteer to meet regularly with the entrepreneur in her *Circle of Support and Inspiration*, to provide support, guidance, advice and encouragement as she grows her business.

ASPIRE! is the result of collaboration and initial participation of several partners in the Northeast Kingdom: The St. Johnsbury Business and Professional Women's Association, Umbrella, Springfield College, NEK Learning Services, and NECKA. Other community partners and businesses have joined in.

**Recruitment:** Your program manager is working to publicize this opportunity in the press, in community meetings, and the range of community organizations, including schools, colleges, service clubs, and advocacy groups, to recruit both applicants and volunteers.

Applicants are encouraged to reach out for suggestions as they develop their business proposals. Other community partners are urged to spread the word and to let more applicants know of the opportunity.

**Selection:** Panels of women business specialists and entrepreneurs will review applications and select ASPIRE! candidates for \$2,000 grants.

**Circle of Support:** Each winning ASPIRE! candidate will be assigned a team of 3-5 business/professional women to act as her *Circle of Support and Inspiration*. Members of the Circle will meet with their ASPIRE! award winner biweekly for three months, offering ongoing feedback, advice, mentoring, networking and connection.

**Competition:** During and after the initial coaching period, candidates will be encouraged to apply for Major Grants to enhance their businesses. Having a formal business plan, completed under the coaching of the *Circle of Support and Inspiration*, ASPIRANTS! will participate in a pitch competition for a second-tier grant of up to \$5,000. A total of up to 4 of these Major Grants will be awarded during the project year.

These competitions for the larger award will involve a panel of professional women who will review the business plans, and listen to presentations from each applicant. The competition will likely be televised on local cable access, NEKTV and KATV. This will display ASPIRANTS!' business presentation skills and generate more publicity, support, and involvement.

**Followup:** The grant funding provides only one year of operation; of paramount importance is that the project find sponsors and other sources of public / private funding for ongoing sustainability.

For more information, please contact:

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