Ignite Wisconsin

Program Guidelines for Fiscal Year 2027
Lead Division: Entrepreneurship and Innovation ☐ **New** ☒ **Revised** 7/1/2026 ☒ **Grant** ☐ **Loan** ☐**Tax Credit** ☐**Technical Assistance**

Introduction

Background Information: This program is designed to increase entrepreneurial density and strengthen startup ecosystems across Wisconsin. Dense, well-connected ecosystems—where entrepreneurs, institutions and support organizations collaborate seamlessly and productively—are proven to catalyze innovation, reduce barriers to entry, and accelerate learning. These ecosystems also elevate regional and sector-based reputations, attracting talent, capital, and additional entrepreneurial activity.

Wisconsin historically lacks the startup and capital density seen in coastal startup hubs, making it harder for early-stage companies to attract the investment needed to launch and scale. To compete nationally and globally, the state must increase the number of high-growth startups and the infrastructure that supports them.

Program Purpose: The program supports the development of collaborative, founder-centric ecosystems that enable scalable, high-growth startups. It prioritizes strategic investment, coordination, and capacity-building to ensure startups have access to the networks, capital, and technical assistance required to thrive.
This program requires a consortium-based model to align with a broad range of partners including higher education, industry, and support organizations. The consortium-based model fosters shared vision, coordinated efforts, expanded capacity, and collective impact.

Investments in infrastructure—such as shared workspaces, accelerators, mentorship networks, and capital programs—lower barriers, foster innovation, and build a resilient foundation for long-term growth.
Ecosystems may focus on seeding ideas, piloting models and building momentum with early wins to lay the groundwork for scalable startup activity. It may also support more mature initiatives that are expanding reach, sustaining and scaling efforts, institutionalizing services, and catalyzing investment-ready startups.

Eligibility Requirements

Eligible Applicants: The Lead Applicant must be a non-profit organization that is part of the intended consortium and who will be accountable for the Ignite Wisconsin grant. The consortium may include investors, educational institutions, incubators, technical assistance providers, founders, sector/industry leaders, economic development organizations, and entrepreneur support organizations. For-profit entities may be a part of the consortium but cannot be the Lead Applicant.

The consortium activities and purpose must be directly aligned with increasing the density of early-stage, high-growth startups and their surrounding ecosystem in Wisconsin, and the applicant is required to have a formal presence in Wisconsin prior to the application submission.

The consortium does not need to establish a separate legal entity to be considered; however, it must have a defined organizational structure that outlines key responsibilities for each participating organization. Consortiums include both Partners and Members. Partners are participating organizations that receive funding and therefore require an MOU. Members are participating organizations that do not receive funding and can provide letters of support. The application should include a governance and communication plan (with decision-making processes), defined roles and responsibilities, budget allocations for each Partner, activities and anticipated goals for each participating organization, a monitoring and evaluation plan, and a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreement executed by all of its Partners.

Each consortium must include at least one of the following entity types, with preference given to those with more than one:

- Entrepreneur support organizations
- Regional or local economic development organizations
- Higher education institutions

A consortium may also include one or more of the following entities:

- Economic development organizations
- Capital and investment organizations including venture development organizations, venture capital firms, angel networks, CDFIs, and banks
- Corporations and industry organizations actively engaged in fostering entrepreneurship, research commercialization, or sector-specific innovation
- Accelerators, incubators, and venture studios
- Local, regional, or Tribal government entities
- Community organizations
- Technology transfer offices
- Service providers that offer technical, legal, financial, or commercialization support to startups and early-stage companies

Eligible Use of Funds: Activities eligible for program assistance or matching funds include:

- <u>Entrepreneur Support & Technical Assistance:</u> Technical assistance program development and operations, consulting fees, mentoring, networking activities, startup technical services such as IP registration, licensing, or related commercialization and launch activities, and personnel costs tied to entrepreneur support activities.
- <u>Direct Business Funding:</u> Stipends, awards, milestone-based prizes, and pass-through capital (grants, loans, convertible notes, equity) aligned with consortium goals
- <u>Programmatic & Space Support:</u> Costs for maintaining coworking, lab or innovation spaces for consortium activities, and supporting programs like founder fellowships, soft landing pads, or entrepreneur-in-residence.
- <u>Marketing, Storytelling & Consortium Operations:</u> Project marketing efforts, recruitment, consortium-driven initiatives, and indirect costs (up to 20% of the budget).

Ineligible Use of Funds: Activities ineligible for program assistance or match include, but are not limited to:

- Activities that do not directly support the expansion of high-growth early-stage

entrepreneurship opportunities
- Research and development
- Regional reports and studies
- Lobbying activities
- Real estate purchases

Matching Funds: This program requires a 10% match of the award, that includes cash or in-kind contributions. Preference will be given to applicants who can provide higher match.

Available Incentives

FY27: $3,500,000

Award Sizes: The minimum Ignite Wisconsin award amount is $200,000. The maximum Ignite Wisconsin award amount is $2,000,000. Program activities should expect to last between 12 and 36 months.

Awards per Lead Applicant: No more than one award per fiscal year.

Activities and Expected Outcomes

Assist 4 consortiums which will assist 127 businesses.

Impact: This program aims to build dense, high-growth entrepreneurial ecosystems that accelerate the success of Wisconsin's early-stage companies. By fostering collaboration and strategic investment, the program enhances the startup landscape and builds more connected and expanded access to both capital and technical assistance. Ultimately, the dense, well-connected ecosystems help more startups launch, grow, and scale in Wisconsin. Expected impacts include:

- Increased early-stage investment
- New or expanded incubators, cohorts, and technical assistance
- Launch or expansion of entrepreneur-in-residence and fellowship programs
- Enhanced commercialization and innovation activities
- Broader storytelling and marketing of Wisconsin's entrepreneurial successes

Metrics: As both an entrepreneurial development and capacity building program, performance reporting metrics for Ignite Wisconsin are focused on measuring investment into entrepreneurs and start-up businesses, as well as their impact on the ecosystem. Reporting metrics will be based on the activity of the consortium specifically in the engagement of the designated project. Ignite Wisconsin program metrics include the following list, and each project will include one or more of these metrics in its reporting requirements depending on the project's specified use of funds.

- Pass-Through Businesses Assisted (Financial)
- Pass-Through Businesses Assisted (Technical)
- Pass-Through Job Creation
- Pass-Through Leverage
- Pass-Through Commercialized Product Sales
- Individuals Served/Engaged (by consortia)
- Leverage – Total

Application Guideline

Timeline: This program will operate under a structured application and review process. Applications will be accepted during a defined application window in the second half of the calendar year and will not be considered on a rolling basis. All submissions received during the open period will be reviewed collectively based on alignment with the program's review considerations and overall strategic goals.

Review Considerations: WEDC may take the following into account when considering an application:

- Consortium Composition and Capacity for Scaling – Strength, diversity, and experience of consortium Members in supporting startups and innovation. Demonstrated ability to scale operations, deepen impact, and sustain long-term growth. Evidence of effective collaboration across Partners.
- Ecosystem Maturity **–** Level of existing high-growth startup activity within the community or sector, including access to capital, strength of the startup pipeline, support infrastructure, and industry engagement. Early indicators of potential to grow beyond the scope of this award.
- Startup Impact – The degree to which startups are successfully launched and able to attract investment, as demonstrated by the strength of founder networks and the accessibility and utilization of available programs, services, and events.
- Marketing and Storytelling Strategy – Clarity and effectiveness of the consortium's marketing and storytelling strategy, including use of case studies, media visibility, founder/investor outreach, and event-based efforts to build momentum and attract key stakeholders.
- Measurable Outcomes and Continuous Improvement – Defined metrics and a project management plan with ambitious yet achievable goals. Focus on increasing startup formation, strengthening entrepreneurial density, and building a sustainable innovation foundation. The program has built-in ways to collect input, measure what's working, and adjust the approach over time instead of staying static.
- Resource Development and Sustainable Funding Model Strategy – A clear pathway and long-term ability to mobilize philanthropic, public, or private capital as WEDC funding is intended to be catalytic rather than sustaining.
- Strategic Alignment with WEDC Priorities – Alignment with WEDC's broader priorities for economic development, innovation, and growth.

How to Apply: An interested applicant should contact a WEDC Account Manager to determine if their project is right for the program. Upon review of the project, and alignment with eligibility criteria, an applicant will be invited to submit their application through Network Wisconsin.

Award Process: The completed application will be assigned to a panel of reviewers and may include a consortium interview. A WEDC underwriter will be assigned to review each recommended award and go through the WEDC award review process.

Performance Reporting: Awarded recipients must submit a performance report semi-annually documenting specific project activities and any other contract deliverables. If the award does not include pass-through funding to businesses, recipients will need to submit an annual report for one year after the award end date. If the award includes pass-through funding to businesses, recipients will need to submit reports annually for three years after the award end date.

WEDC annually selects awards on a sample basis for an audit. All backups to the performance report and financial records are required to be maintained by the Recipient for a period of at least three (3) years after the last performance report is due.

WEDC may impose additional reporting requirements to evaluate project performance and to ensure compliance with contract deliverables.

Helpful Information

Definitions:

"Consortium" - defined as two or more organizations. The proposed consortium does not need to establish a separate legal entity to be considered.

"Lead Applicant" - Nonprofit member of the consortium leading the application and administration of the award.

"Partners" - Participating organizations that receive funding and require an MOU.

"Members" - Participating organizations that do not receive funding but can provide letters of support.

"Higher Education Institution" – colleges, universities, technical colleges, and community colleges.

Revision History

Program Inception – Fiscal Year 2026

- 7/1/2026: Updates to definitions and consortium parameters.