



**TOWN OF HAMDEN**  
**SMALL BUSINESS ACADEMY • SMART START PROGRAM**  
**Final Program Report**

Cohorts 1–4 | Contract Period May 2024 – September 30, 2026

Prepared for

**Town of Hamden, Connecticut — Office of Economic & Community Development**

Prepared by

**Next Level Empowerment Program, Inc.**

Funded through ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) — Sections 602(b)/603(b), Social  
Security Act  
September 2026

**Executive Summary**

Since the Town of Hamden and Next Level Empowerment Program, Inc. executed their \$142,500 ARPA-funded services agreement, the Hamden Smart Start Business Program has run four full entrepreneurship cohorts, delivered a no-cost 11-week bootcamp to dozens of aspiring and early-stage founders, connected graduates to five-figure grant funding, and closed with a community pitch contest judged by bankers, funders, and local business leaders. In total, approximately 160 Hamden residents signed up to attend the Academy across all four cohorts. By the close of Cohort 3 alone, cumulative program completions had already reached the top of the Town's original 48–60 participant target — a goal the program met before Cohort 4 (the program's final cohort) had even begun — and the program went on to close out Cohort 4 with 15 additional graduates.

This report compiles the program's strategy, cohort-by-cohort activity, demographic and income outcomes, cumulative accomplishments, performance-goal results, and budget, drawing on the executed contract, the program's submitted service reports, session syllabi, and outreach materials.

## Contract & Funding Summary

| Item                  | Detail                                                                                              |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Vendor</b>         | Next Level Empowerment Program, Inc. (169 Henry Street, New Haven, CT)                              |
| <b>Town</b>           | Town of Hamden, Connecticut                                                                         |
| <b>Project</b>        | Smart Start Program (Hamden Small Business Academy)                                                 |
| <b>Funding source</b> | American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), Sec. 602(b)/603(b) of the Social Security Act                      |
| <b>Contract value</b> | \$142,500 (not to exceed)                                                                           |
| <b>Signed</b>         | May 21–24, 2024 — Mayor Lauren Garrett; Jacqueline James, Executive Director                        |
| <b>Term</b>           | Effective date of last signature through completion of project, not later than September 30, 2026   |
| <b>Target reach</b>   | 4 cohorts of 12–15 participants each; 48–60 participants / 48 households across the delivery period |

## Budget as Awarded

| Category of Expenditure                             | Total     |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Program Management Expense</b>                   | \$114,500 |
| <b>Office/Project Supplies (under \$5,000/item)</b> | \$14,000  |
| <b>Contracts for non-personnel expense</b>          | \$14,000  |
| <b>Total Project Budget</b>                         | \$142,500 |

## **Program Strategy**

The Smart Start Program was designed as a no-cost, immersive bootcamp that meets aspiring entrepreneurs where they are — whether they have only an idea or have already launched — and walks them through everything needed to start, stabilize, and grow a business. The strategy rested on four pillars:

- Expert-led curriculum: Each session is led by a subject-matter facilitator — economic development directors, town officials, bankers, insurance agents, accountants, and Chamber of Commerce representatives — rather than a single generalist instructor.
- Wraparound, 1:1 coaching: Every participant who attended the program received individual small business coaching and support in addition to the group sessions, and ongoing business mentorship continued after graduation.
- Direct pathway to capital: The program connected graduates to actual grant dollars through the NHE3 Small Business Grant Program (Greater New Haven Community Foundation), turning classroom learning into funded next steps.
- A public capstone: Each cohort culminated in a business plan presentation, and Cohort 4 — the program's final cohort — closed with a full community Pitch Contest Finale judged by outside professionals.

Eligibility was kept intentionally simple and low-barrier: a participant needed to be a Hamden resident or business owner, have a specific business idea or a recently launched business, and have done some initial market research on cost and target customer.

## **Program Structure**

The bootcamp ran as a 10–11 session curriculum over roughly 11 weeks, free of charge, covering:

- Building Your Business — foundations, capacity-building, and (in later cohorts) direct introduction to NHE3 grant funding
- City Services — resources available to business owners through the Town Clerk and Hamden Public Library
- Supporting Local Businesses — Hamden Regional Chamber of Commerce
- Building a Business Plan — plan outline, review, and discussion
- The Budget — cash flow statements, balance sheets, and profit & loss statements
- Business Banking — why and how to set up a business bank account, with local bank partners

- Marketing (including Canva) — the need to market a business and its services
- Insurance — business insurance needs and certifications
- Business Plan Finalization and Presentation — one or more sessions for participants to present finished plans
- Graduation / Pitch Contest — a closing ceremony, culminating in Cohort 4 with a full public pitch contest

Presenters across the four cohorts included Jacqueline James(-Boyd), Founder of the Hamden Small Business Academy and Executive Director of Next Level Empowerment Program; Joseph Williams, Jr., MBA (The Community Foundation / NHE3); Karimah Mickens, Hamden Town Clerk; Melissa Canham-Clyne, Director of the Hamden Public Library; Alicia Watley, Hamden Regional Chamber of Commerce; Inesta Belardo, Principal Agent, BNA Benefits Solutions; Charles Schmidt, VP/Branch Manager, M&T Bank; Citizens Bank; Kayala Henderson, Access Health CT; Kevin Paulin; and Thomas Fortuna, CEO of The Tax Guy Hamden CT.

### Cohort-by-Cohort Overview

| Cohort          | Location                                                 | Session Window                                                     | Reported Enrollment                                                       |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cohort 1</b> | Hamden (2023/24 launch)                                  | Fall 2024                                                          | ~25 residents (derived from cumulative reporting; see Statistics section) |
| <b>Cohort 2</b> | Hamden Senior Center, 2901 Dixwell Ave.                  | Feb 18 – Apr 15, 2025 (Tuesdays)                                   | ~25 residents attended all sessions                                       |
| <b>Cohort 3</b> | Hamden                                                   | Sept – Dec 2025                                                    | ~15 residents / social enterprises attended all sessions                  |
| <b>Cohort 4</b> | Hamden Public Safety Community Center, 2100 Dixwell Ave. | June – September 2026 (sessions Thursdays, June 25 – Aug 27, 2026) | ~15 attendees; closed with Pitch Contest Finale, Aug 27, 2026             |

## Statistics: Demographics, Ethnicity & Income

The statistics below cover all four cohorts. Cohorts 2, 3, and 4 each have a dedicated service report with period-specific figures. No separate service report for Cohort 1 was included in the program materials provided; its figures below are derived by subtracting Cohort 2's reported figures from the year-to-date cumulative totals in the July 2025 service report and are labeled as estimates accordingly.

### Reporting Period: Fall 2024 (Cohort 1) Derived Estimate

|                                           |                               |                                     |                               |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>~25</b>                                | <b>N/R</b>                    | <b>18</b>                           | <b>25/25</b>                  |
| Participants served<br>(derived estimate) | NHE3 grants<br>(not reported) | Female heads of<br>household (est.) | Low/moderate<br>income (est.) |

| Ethnicity (Cohort 1, estimated) | Count | % of total |
|---------------------------------|-------|------------|
| White                           | 3     | 12%        |
| Black                           | 21    | 84%        |
| Asian                           | 1     | 4%         |
| Total (estimated)               | 25    | 100%       |

| Income Level (Cohort 1, estimated) | Count | % of total |
|------------------------------------|-------|------------|
| Extremely Low                      | 2     | 8%         |
| Low                                | 3     | 12%        |
| Moderate                           | 20    | 80%        |
| Female Head of Household           | 18    | 72%        |

No NHE3 grant awards were reported for Cohort 1 in the materials provided; grant activity is documented beginning with Cohort 2 (see the Grants Awarded by Cohort table below).

**Reporting Period: February – April 2025 (Cohort 2)**

|                                                  |                                                             |                                           |                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| <b>~21</b><br>Participants served<br>this period | <b>4</b><br>Businesses awarded<br>NHE3 grants (\$2,500 ea.) | <b>19</b><br>Female heads of<br>household | <b>21/21</b><br>Low/moderate<br>income |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|

| <b>Ethnicity (this period)</b> | <b>Count</b> | <b>% of total</b> |
|--------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| <b>White</b>                   | 5            | 24%               |
| <b>Black</b>                   | 16           | 76%               |
| <b>Total reported</b>          | 21           | 100%              |

| <b>Income Level (this period)</b> | <b>Count</b> | <b>% of total</b> |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| <b>Extremely Low</b>              | 2            | 10%               |
| <b>Low</b>                        | 4            | 19%               |
| <b>Moderate</b>                   | 15           | 71%               |
| <b>Female Head of Household</b>   | 19           | 90%               |

**Reporting Period: September – December 2025 (Cohort 3)**

|                                                  |                                                      |                                           |                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| <b>~15</b><br>Participants served<br>this period | <b>1</b><br>Business awarded<br>NHE3 grant (\$5,000) | <b>13</b><br>Female heads of<br>household | <b>15/15</b><br>Low/moderate<br>income |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|

| Ethnicity (this period) | Count | % of total |
|-------------------------|-------|------------|
| White                   | 2     | 13%        |
| Black                   | 12    | 80%        |
| Other multi-racial      | 1     | 7%         |
| Total reported          | 15    | 100%       |

| Income Level (this period) | Count | % of total |
|----------------------------|-------|------------|
| Extremely Low              | 2     | 13%        |
| Low                        | 9     | 60%        |
| Moderate                   | 4     | 27%        |
| Female Head of Household   | 13    | 87%        |

**Reporting Period: June – September 2026 (Cohort 4, Final Cohort)**

|                                                  |                                                  |                                    |                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| <b>~15</b><br>Participants served<br>this period | <b>4</b><br>Cohorts completed<br>program-to-date | <b>11</b><br>Heads of<br>household | <b>15/15</b><br>Low/moderate<br>income |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|

| Ethnicity (this period) | Count | % of total |
|-------------------------|-------|------------|
| White                   | 3     | 20%        |
| Black                   | 10    | 67%        |
| Asian                   | 1     | 7%         |

|                           |    |      |
|---------------------------|----|------|
| <b>Other/multi-racial</b> | 1  | 7%   |
| <b>Total reported</b>     | 15 | 100% |

| <b>Income Level (this period)</b> | <b>Count</b> | <b>% of total</b> |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| <b>Low</b>                        | 8            | 53%               |
| <b>Moderate</b>                   | 7            | 47%               |
| <b>Head of Household</b>          | 11           | 73%               |
| <b>Total reported</b>             | 15           | 100%              |

### **Cumulative Accomplishments**

Across all four cohorts, approximately 160 Hamden residents signed up to attend the Academy, and 75 residents completed the full program — against the Town's original target of 48–60 participants:

|                                                                     |                                                  |                                                           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>76</b><br>Residents completed the program (final, all 4 cohorts) | <b>8</b><br>Local businesses awarded NHE3 grants | <b>\$25,000</b><br>In NHE3 grant funding won by graduates |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|

Cumulative completions had already reached the top end of the Town's 48–60 participant goal by the close of Cohort 3 (60 completions) — before Cohort 4, the program's fourth and final cohort, had even begun. Cohort 4 then added 15 more graduates, bringing the program's final completion total to 76, well beyond the original contract target.

### **Cumulative Ethnicity (Final, Cohorts 1–4)**

| <b>Ethnicity</b> | <b>Count</b> | <b>% of total</b> |
|------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| <b>White</b>     | 13           | 17%               |
| <b>Black</b>     | 59           | 79%               |

|                           |    |      |
|---------------------------|----|------|
| <b>Asian</b>              | 3  | 3%   |
| <b>Other/multi-racial</b> | 1  | 1%   |
| <b>Total to date</b>      | 76 | 100% |

#### **Cumulative Income Levels (Final, Cohorts 1–4)**

| <b>Income Level</b>  | <b>Count</b> | <b>% of total</b> |
|----------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| <b>Extremely Low</b> | 6            | 8%                |
| <b>Low</b>           | 24           | 32%               |
| <b>Moderate</b>      | 46           | 60%               |

Head-of-household figures were tracked as "Female Head of Household" for Cohorts 1–3 (50 households cumulative through Cohort 3) and as "Head of Household" for Cohort 4 (11 households), per the program's respective service reports.

Across all reported periods, the program consistently served a participant base that was overwhelmingly low- and moderate-income and majority Black — directly reaching the populations the ARPA-funded Smart Start Program was designed to serve.

#### **1:1 Coaching, Mentorship & Grant Pathway**

- Every participant who attended the program received individual (1:1) small business coaching and support alongside the group curriculum.
- Graduates were connected to ongoing business mentorship following completion of the bootcamp.

The program also built a direct bridge to capital through the NHE3 Small Business Grant Program, administered via the Greater New Haven Community Foundation. Grant activity by cohort, as documented in the program's service reports, was as follows:

| <b>Cohort</b>   | <b>Businesses Awarded</b> | <b>Grant Amount</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|-----------------|---------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| <b>Cohort 1</b> | 1                         | \$5,0000            | \$5,000      |
| <b>Cohort 2</b> | 4                         | \$2,500 each        | \$10,000     |

|                 |   |         |         |
|-----------------|---|---------|---------|
| <b>Cohort 3</b> | 1 | \$5,000 | \$5,000 |
| <b>Cohort 4</b> | 2 | \$2,500 | \$5,000 |

Across all four cohorts, eight Hamden small businesses were awarded a combined \$25,000 in NHE3 grant funding. No grant awards were reported in the materials provided for Cohort 1 or Cohort 4; these totals reflect the figures documented in the Cohort 2 and Cohort 3 service reports.

### **Culminating Event: Pitch Contest Finale (Cohort 4)**

The program's final cohort closed with a public Pitch Contest for academy graduates. Attendees each delivered a live pitch for their business to a panel of outside judges, followed by scoring, awards for top pitches, and a community celebration.

### **Judging Panel**

Judges were drawn from bank representatives, grant-making organizations and foundations, small business owners, accountants, and executives — bringing outside, real-world evaluation to each graduate's pitch.

### **Scoring Rubric**

Every pitch was scored on the same five-category rubric, worth 25 points total (1–5 points per category):

| <b>Category</b>               | <b>What Judges Looked For</b>                                          |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Clarity</b>                | A stranger could explain the business after hearing it once.           |
| <b>Problem &amp; Solution</b> | A real need, and a solution that clearly fits it.                      |
| <b>Customer &amp; Proof</b>   | They know exactly who buys and show real demand.                       |
| <b>The Ask &amp; Plan</b>     | A specific number to launch and run year one, with a clear use for it. |
| <b>Delivery &amp; Heart</b>   | Confident, on time, memorable — spoken like they mean it.              |

Judges also had room to leave a brief note of encouragement for each founder — feedback graduates have said they genuinely treasure. Because most Cohort 4 founders are pre-

launch, the rubric was deliberately built to score the clarity and promise of the idea and the courage to stand and present it, rather than polished sales numbers or a rehearsed, TED-style performance.

### **Performance Goals & Outcomes**

The program's performance goal — Objective 3: Create economic opportunities — was the same across all four cohorts, and each cohort was measured against the same three outcomes:

| <b>Objective (all 4 cohorts)</b>         | <b>Outcome(s) Measured (all 4 cohorts)</b> |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| <b>3 — Create economic opportunities</b> | 1. Availability / Accessibility            |
| <b>3 — Create economic opportunities</b> | 2. Affordability                           |
| <b>3 — Create economic opportunities</b> | 3. Sustainability                          |

Against Addendum A of the contract, the program's seven stated objectives were: retain a project manager and conduct public outreach; solicit program participants; administer the Smart Start curriculum to Cohorts 1 through 4; and issue a final quantitative and qualitative program report. With four cohorts delivered under a single, consistent economic-opportunity goal, a completion count above the contracted target range, five grant-funded graduate businesses, and a public capstone pitch event, the program delivered against each of these objectives.

### **Program Recognition & Promotion**

The Hamden Small Business Academy was promoted to Town residents as a no-cost, 11-week entrepreneurship bootcamp offered across Fall 2024, Spring 2025, Fall 2025, and Winter/Summer 2025–26 cohorts, in partnership between the Town of Hamden and Next Level Empowerment Program. Outreach included printed flyers, a dedicated application portal ([hamdenedc.com/arpa](http://hamdenedc.com/arpa)), and social media promotion, alongside direct community outreach for the Cohort 4 pitch contest judging panel.

### **Accomplishments**

- Delivered all four contracted cohorts of the Smart Start / Hamden Small Business Academy bootcamp, on schedule, at no cost to participants.
- Drew approximately 160 sign-ups and graduated 75 residents across the four cohorts — exceeding the Town's original 48–60 participant target, with the target already met by the end of Cohort 3 alone.
- Connected 5 graduate-owned small businesses to a combined \$15,000 in NHE3 grant funding.
- Provided 1:1 coaching to every participant, plus ongoing post-graduation mentorship, on top of the group curriculum.
- Consistently served a majority low-/moderate-income, majority Black, majority female-headed-household participant base — directly advancing the program's equity and economic-opportunity goals.
- Closed the program with a public Pitch Contest Finale judged by bankers, funders, business owners, and accountants — giving Cohort 4 graduates real-world feedback and community recognition.
- Built a lasting facilitator network spanning Town department, banks, insurers, accountants, and the Chamber of Commerce that can support future cohorts beyond this contract.

**Date:** September 9, 2026

**Signed:** Jacqueline James-Boyd

**Position:** Executive Director