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Greater Washington Partnership Launches Inaugural Cohort for Diverse Entrepreneur Accelerator Program

Next Level: Elevating Diverse Entrepreneurs aims to accelerate growth and investment in Black, Brown, and women-owned businesses from Baltimore to Richmond

WASHINGTON – Today, the Greater Washington Partnership, a nonprofit alliance of the region’s most influential and leading employers, announced the launch of *Next Level: Elevating Diverse Entrepreneurs*, a new business accelerator pilot program funded by a grant from Truist Foundation. The program, in collaboration with local nonprofit accelerator 1863 Ventures, will provide customized technical assistance, coaching, and curated events to help Black, Brown, and women-owned businesses from Baltimore to Richmond acquire, fulfill, and retain contracts for the region's largest buyers.

“Diverse businesses are a key driver of economic growth,” said **Kathy Hollinger, CEO of Greater Washington Partnership**. “Yet, the Partnership’s [Inclusive Growth Dashboard](#) shows acute racial disparities in business ownership and survival. While Black residents make up nearly 27% of the region’s population, the number of Black small business owners is only 5%. By providing more opportunities for Black, Brown, and women entrepreneurs to connect and network with large-scale companies, this new collaboration with Truist Foundation and 1863 Ventures will help diverse businesses gain equitable opportunity to acquire contracts and sustain their businesses.”

According to the Fed Small Business Credit Survey, the pandemic further exacerbated racial disparities in business ownership and success - 86% of Black-owned and 85% of Latino-owned small businesses reported sales declines in 2020, compared to 79% of White-owned businesses. The Partnership’s new Entrepreneurship Insights Brief, developed in partnership with Deloitte, also showed that challenges for business success and growth are complex. Diverse-entrepreneurs face unique barriers to accessing capital, talent, markets, and networks, and collective support in each of these four areas is critical to closing longstanding equity gaps.

The *Next Level* program builds on the Partnership's larger efforts to support diverse-owned businesses by helping to connect corporations with suppliers who are historically overlooked and underutilized through networking, market exposure, and technical assistance.

Last year, Partnership organizations made a collective [\\$4.7 billion, 5-year commitment](#) to support Brown, Black and women-owned businesses and underrepresented communities through direct investment across supplier diversity, community development financial institutions (CDFIs)/minority depository institutions (MDIs) support, and racial equity programs from Baltimore to Richmond. The *Next Level* program also complements the Partnership's region-wide supplier diversity community of practice, which leverages toolkits, relationships, and convenings to help more than 100 corporate leaders increase spending with diverse businesses.

"At Truist, we're committed to creating pathways for small business owners, particularly women entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs of color, to help them succeed and access wealth-building opportunities," said **Evelyn Lee, Truist regional president for Greater Washington**. "Supporting the Greater Washington Partnership's great work in this area is an example of how we live our purpose to inspire and build better lives and communities."

"1863 Ventures is thrilled to strengthen the business accelerator ecosystem in our region, with the introduction of Next Level. The collaboration between 1863, Greater Washington Partnership and Truist Foundation will equip diverse entrepreneurs with the necessary tools to acquire and retain contracts for the region's largest and most competitive buyers. We look forward to welcoming the inaugural cohort of entrepreneurs who will spend the next several months learning and applying concepts to accelerate their business growth, access capital and grow their networks," said **Melissa Bradley, Founder and Managing Partner of 1863 Ventures**.

Sixteen business owners from across the region were selected for this inaugural cohort and will receive curated training, coaching, and tools to present their value proposition to navigate procurement processes and raise capital. Businesses will also gain access to a regional network of fellow large-scale companies as well as Greater Washington Partnership organizations. Upon completion of the program, participants will leverage the skills and relationships they've obtained to pitch their services to companies and investors from across the region.

Meet the 16 local entrepreneurs selected:

- Jamyla Bennu, [Oyin Handmade](#)
- Khadija Dawn Carryl, [Henna Soog](#)
- Angela Chester-Johnson, [Plum Good](#)
- Jennifer Dunn, [Bunifu Learning](#)

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- Matt Evans, [Code Super Powers](#)
 - Kamel Greene, [Poly Platform](#)
 - Patricia Griffith, [Experiences On Demand](#)
 - Chibueze Ihenacho, [ARMR Systems](#)
 - Lamont Kenner, Paragon Educational Services
 - Pamela Konde, [Mac's Tire Service](#)
 - Anna Peoples, [Peoples Pharmacy](#)
 - Venessa Perry, [Health Resources Solutions](#)
 - Mali Phonpadith, [SOAR Community Network](#)
 - Thomas Sanchez, [Social Driver](#)
 - Amanda Stephenson, [The Fresh Food Factory](#)
 - Chelle Swain, [Terra Rossa](#)

Learn more about the *Next Level* program at greaterwashingtonpartnership.com/Next-Level.

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About the Greater Washington Partnership

Greater Washington Partnership is the first-of-its-kind nonprofit alliance of the region's most influential and leading employers across industry sectors in Maryland, Virginia and Washington, DC – all committed to championing the region's economic growth and vibrancy. Together, we leverage our collective experiences, resources and assets to identify shared challenges and offer real solutions to the region's most critical issues including skills and talent, regional mobility, infrastructure and inclusive growth. Our goal is to ensure the entire region, from Baltimore to Richmond, remains vibrant, economically competitive, prosperous for all and is the best place to live, work and build a business.

About 1863 Ventures

1863 Ventures is a leader in providing culturally competent accelerator programs, non-dilutive financing, and mentorship to Black, Latino, and other historically underestimated entrepreneurs. By addressing the unique needs of this demographic, 1863 Ventures assists entrepreneurs in transforming high-potential business ideas into high-growth, profitable companies that generate jobs and wealth for their communities. For more information, visit 1863ventures.net or follow @1863ventures on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [LinkedIn](#).

About Truist Foundation

Truist Foundation is committed to Truist Financial Corporation's (NYSE: TFC) purpose to inspire and build better lives and communities. Established in 2020, the foundation makes strategic investments in nonprofit organizations to help ensure the communities it serves have more



opportunities for a better quality of life. Truist Foundation's grants and activities focus on building career pathways to economic mobility and strengthening small businesses. Learn more at Truist.com/Foundation.