Wells Fargo Works for Small Business® Diverse Community Capital (DCC)

CDFI Best Practice Case Study: Small Business Technical Assistance

As a Diverse Community Capital Awardee... Northern Initiatives’ loans and business services help underserved minority and women owned small businesses in rural Michigan and Wisconsin and partners with other CDFIs to bring learning and resources to small businesses across the U.S.

Challenge and Solution

Northern Initiatives serves an array of small businesses across its Michigan and Wisconsin service area. As its loan volume and geographical footprint began to grow a few years ago, the CDFI wanted to improve its Technical Assistance (TA) program to better fill needs of clients spread across an expansive, mostly rural geography. Historically, the CDFI shared technical assistance materials with clients via email and tracked requests manually. As it began to formalize and scale its TA program to serve more people, it looked at creating an online hub for materials that would make them more readily available.

In 2017, the CDFI launched Initiate, an online business resource that takes a blended approach — technology and personalized coaching — to financial literacy and small business education. Initiate users have access to web-based resources and are also paired with a CDFI business coach for individualized support. With Initiate, Northern Initiatives offers:

- 24/7 access to more than a 100 interactive tools, templates, videos, and guides on topics ranging from accounting to marketing, management to information technology
- individualized coaching for customized guidance through TA issues
- partnership with an individualized business coach for personalized support
- a customizable TA portal for other CDFIs to use with their own clients as part of their CDFI’s business services

Impact

Since 2017:

- 191 customers have accessed Initiate for a total of 175 hours of training and 905 resources used.
- Six CDFIs, covering 31 states, have partnered with Northern Initiatives to adopt Initiate and make it available to their own clients: Accion, Colorado Enterprise Fund, LiftFund, RCAC, and Wisconsin Women’s Business Initiative Corporation (WWBIC).

“Northern Initiatives’ blended learning approach to business assistance, online learning and coaching are complementary activities that build on each other and, together, deliver more value to the customer than either would on its own.”

(Center for Rural Entrepreneurship’s Evaluation of Northern Initiatives’ Blended Learning Approach to Business Assistance)
Areas Served by *Initiate*

About Northern Initiatives

Northern Initiatives is a CDFI in business to provide loans and business services to small business owners and entrepreneurs who create jobs and enable the communities of Michigan and neighboring Wisconsin to thrive.

**Founded:** 1992  
**Type of CDFI:** Loan Fund  
**Target Market:** Entrepreneurs and small business in Michigan and Wisconsin  
**Types of Lending:** Small Business  
**Total Loaned:** $60 million  
**Loans Made:** 1,030  
**Jobs Created/Retained:** 4,629  
**Customers receiving TA:** 100%  
**Customers:** 73% underserved communities; 30% women owned; 29% start-ups  
**Website:** northerninitiatives.org  

“Being able to provide access to resources for people starting or growing a business helps us serve and strengthen more diverse small businesses borrowers, and now that we’re working with more CDFIs across the U.S. we can reach even more communities.”

— Amanda Blondeau, Business Services Director, Northern Initiatives

*This is one in a six-part series of cases studies spotlighting CDFIs (community development financial institutions) in the Wells Fargo Diverse Community Capital network, which is funded with a $175 million commitment in capital and has already supported more than 40,000 jobs and $390 million in financing for diverse small businesses. CDFIs are private financial institutions dedicated to delivering responsible, affordable lending and financial services to help underserved people and communities join the economic mainstream.*

(April 2019)