

Innovate ND Program Manual

2025–27 Biennium

Program Overview

Innovate ND is a state-funded, voucher-based reimbursement program designed to help North Dakota entrepreneurs advance their businesses by supporting customer and market research. Each participant may receive up to \$50,000 in reimbursable expenses, administered through the Entrepreneur Centers. The program is divided into two phases, each offering up to \$25,000 in reimbursements. Participants have six months per phase, with a maximum of 12 months to complete the full program.

Program Goals

Innovate ND aims to:

- Grow North Dakota's entrepreneurial ecosystem to foster economic development and diversification.
- Educate and support entrepreneurs on the lean business model canvas, market validation, and customer identification.
- Help entrepreneurs validate their product and market through metrics such as revenue growth, profit margins, employee growth, capital raised, sales, and customer interview insights.
- Support the development of innovative, scalable businesses with the potential for primary sector certification.

Key Definitions

Commerce: North Dakota Department of Commerce

Entrepreneur Centers:

- CTB/North Dakota Women's Business Center (Bismarck/Fargo)
- Jamestown Regional Entrepreneurial Center (Jamestown)
- NDSU Research & Technology Park (Fargo)
- UND Center for Innovation (Grand Forks)

Lead Coach: A lead coach from one of the Centers assigned to each participant.

Participant: The business or team enrolled in the Innovate ND program.

Panel: A review committee composed of the Entrepreneur Centers and Commerce who determine advancement to Phase 1 and Phase 2. From time to time, Commerce may invite other state authorized board/commissions to provide feedback on company presentations.

Programming Rules and Eligibility

- North Dakota-based business with at least one founder residing in the state.
- Registration and good standing with the ND Secretary of State's Office
- A scalable business model with high-growth potential to reach Primary Sector Certification. Retail, hospitality, and local service-based ventures are not eligible.
- Acceptance into Phase 1 or Phase 2 is not guaranteed.
- Reimbursements are only issued once all requirements are met, expenses are approved, and proof of payment is submitted. Expenses must occur within the program phase timeframe.
- All requirements must be completed within six months per phase. In rare cases, Commerce may pause the participant's progress due to significant life events.
- Participants must complete a survey post-program.
- Funding is distributed on a first-come, first-served basis.
- Businesses that have previously participated in the program, regardless of the phase completed, are not eligible.

Application Process and Requirements

The application is available on the Innovate ND webpage: <https://belegendary.link/InnovateND>.

Commerce will accept applications in quarterly application windows. The dates of the application windows are subject to change and the information will be available on the Innovate ND webpage.

A completed application includes the questionnaire and the following supporting documentation:

- A pitch deck
- A business plan (or executive summary to a business plan)
- A business model canvas (optional)

Applications are reviewed for completeness and eligibility. Eligible applications are scored, based on the following criteria:

- Business Plan and innovation
- Founding team qualifications and readiness
- Market opportunity & customer validation
- North Dakota impact and alignment with program goals
- Milestones and work plan

The top scoring applicants are invited to pitch to the Panel. The Panel determines which applicants are approved for Phase 1 (access is not guaranteed). Approved participants will be assigned a lead coach and begin Phase 1.

Applicants who are not selected for Phase 1, whether due to not achieving a top-tier score or through denial by the Panel, may submit a new application during subsequent application windows. In certain cases, applicants

may receive feedback indicating that they are required to demonstrate additional progress or advancements in their business prior to reapplying in a future funding round.

Phase 1

Phase 1 Requirements:

- Define goals and metrics for Phase 1 with your coach.
- Complete 40 customer interviews.
- Participate in bi-weekly check-ins with lead coach.
- Email bi-weekly updates to Entrepreneur Centers, Commerce and interested parties, including the following areas:
 - Help Wanted / Asks
 - Highlights & Lowlights
 - Product Updates
 - Objectives & Key Results (OKRs)
 - Critical Interviews & Networking
 - Media Mentions / Press
 - Kudos
- Develop Lean Business Model Canvas.
- Complete requirements within 6 months.
- Submit an expense report with invoices and proof of payment (e.g., bank or credit card statement, canceled check). All expenses must be dated within the timeframe of Phase 1 participation.

Phase 2

Eligibility:

- All Phase 1 requirements and reimbursements must be completed and approved.
- Participants must pitch to the Panel with key insights and a revised plan.

Phase 2 Requirements:

- Define goals and metrics for Phase 2 with your coach.
- Conduct an additional 40 customer interviews.
- Continue bi-weekly check-ins and updates with lead coach.
- Email bi-weekly updates to Entrepreneur Centers, Commerce and interested parties, including the following areas:
 - Help Wanted / Asks
 - Highlights & Lowlights
 - Product Updates
 - Objectives & Key Results (OKRs)

- Critical Interviews & Networking
- Media Mentions / Press
- Kudos
- Continue developing the Lean Business Model Canvas.
- Complete requirements within 6 months.
- Submit an expense report with invoices and proof of payment (e.g., bank or credit card statement, canceled check). All expenses must be dated within the timeframe of Phase 2 participation.

Eligible Expenses

To qualify for reimbursements, invoices or receipts must include:

- Business name
- Itemized description of goods/services
- Payment verification
- Purchase date withing program phase timeline

Eligible expense categories may include:

- Legal, accounting, and marketing services
- Prototype development or small-batch inventory
- Membership or registration fees
- Travel for customer interviews, trade shows, or conferences (airfare, hotel)
- Business process development (web, software, social media, distribution)
- Specialized equipment access that is not readily available (non-operational, not general office).
- Any other expenses deemed eligible by Commerce – must receive upfront approval in writing if expense category is not listed above.

Ineligible expenses include but are not limited to:

- Food, beverages, and alcohol
- Salaries or wages
- Inventory
- Consulting services or fees (i.e., finders fees and monthly retainers)
- Supplies or general office expenses
- Rent or lease expenses
- Ongoing operational expenses