

SWEET BEGINNINGS

THE ORGANIZATION

A wholly owned for-profit subsidiary of the North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN), Sweet Beginnings uses the production of beelove™ – a line of honey-based products – to provide job training to community residents who, due to former incarceration or other circumstances, have found it difficult to procure gainful employment. beelove™ products are sold at Whole Foods, Mariano's, and other retail outlets.

THE CHALLENGE

Sweet Beginnings serves the North Lawndale community, which is one of the city's most under-resourced: 43 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, 21 percent are unemployed, the per capita income is \$12,034 per year, and 57 percent of adults have been formerly incarcerated.

THE SOLUTION

Sweet Beginnings tackles the linked problem of incarceration and poverty by providing residents with transitional jobs from which they can move to employment in the broader economy. Employees gain vital experience while making and packaging beelove™ products, tracking inventory, monitoring sales, and working with honeybees and hives – training that transfers to positions in manufacturing, food service, distribution, warehousing, hospitality, customer service, and more.

75 percent of Sweet Beginnings workers transition to unsubsidized employment after three months; 90 percent retain that employment for 30 days or more; 85 percent retain it for 90 days or more; and 75 percent for more than 180 days. While the state's recidivism rate is 52 percent, over a seven-year period less than 4 percent of those employed by Sweet Beginnings return to prison.

LOAN AMOUNT AND EXPECTED IMPACT

The \$500,000 loan will be used to expand production and sales so that Sweet Beginnings can expand the transitional hiring period from three months to six months and meet its goal of training more than 300 North Lawndale residents over the next five years.



“Strong demand for our beelove products is giving individuals a second chance at a sweet beginning. This type of capital is extremely difficult for leaders of color to access. This loan will, for the first time, allow us to achieve the transformation we seek as a social enterprise business that employs residents from the west side of Chicago.”

*- Brenda Palms Barber,
Founding CEO*

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