

THE DELTA I-FUND

The Delta I-Fund™ is an early stage, proof-of-concept accelerator formed to train entrepreneurs in the eight-state Delta Regional Authority territory. Each startup team accepted into the program will complete 10-12 weeks of rigorous lean startup training, be matched to a mentor from the business community and receive technical assistance or access to seed-stage investment capital, depending on the team's geographical location.

The Delta I-Fund is administered by Winrock International, in partnership with entrepreneurial support organizations ("ESOs") throughout the Delta region.



The Need

The Delta Regional Authority territory has suffered from poverty for decades. From 1980-2011, over 43 percent of the counties within the region were classified as having "persistent poverty." To receive such a designation, a county or parish must have 20 percent or more of its residents living in poverty over the last 30 years. When compared to the United States at approximately 11 percent, this statistic alone indicates the distress level of the target region.

The region is home to a rich culture, unmatched natural resources, metropolitan and rural areas with unique economic opportunities and higher education institutions that rival those across the globe. It also boasts an impressive transportation network, including the Mississippi River, that connects the United States to the globe.

Today, there are over 250 innovative technologies available for licensing and/or commercialization at the 11 largest research universities within the DRA territory.

There is no question that the DRA territory has the potential for growth and economic development. However, due to the lack of entrepreneurial training and funding within the region, innovators are leaving the region in pursuit of better resources or deciding not to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams.

The Model

The Delta I-Fund closes this gap in resources for early-stage entrepreneurs within the DRA territory and seeks to ultimately break the region’s cycle of economic underdevelopment and poverty.

The Delta I-Fund recruits entrepreneurial teams throughout the DRA territory and develops them by administering a structured, 10 to 12-week training program modeled after I-Corps™, a program formed by the National Science Foundation in 2011. Thousands of teams have been through the national I-Corps program, which is structured around curriculum founded by Steve Blank and Stanford University.

The program teaches entrepreneurs how to develop and document their proposed business model on a lean canvas and how to test their business hypotheses through a rigorous customer discovery process.

Another key value proposition of the Delta I-Fund is the support and guidance of a mentor from the business community. Nearly every aspect of the Delta I-Fund program is virtual and flexible to meet participants where they are throughout the region, encouraging teams to plant roots in their communities and create jobs.

The Delta I-Fund prepares Arkansas teams to pitch for local, private investments made available as they successfully navigate through the Delta I-Fund program.

The program provides a capped amount of technical assistance to teams located in non-Arkansas DRA counties and parishes.



Partner ESOs

Since its inception, the Delta I-Fund has garnered the support and recruiting help of over 50 entrepreneurial support organizations, “ESO’s” throughout the territory. These include non-profit organizations, universities, other accelerators, etc.

It is through these organizations that the program has been able to expand its assistance to entrepreneurial teams in Mississippi, Louisiana and Tennessee. By the time the DRA’s grant for this program expires, the Delta I-Fund team plans to expand its resources to all eight states, with a focus on reaching rural entrepreneurs.

The Team

The Delta I-Fund is managed by Amy Hopper, a program officer at Winrock International. Amy joined the program in April 2017 and is certified as a Lean LaunchPad® Educator. Since joining the team, Amy led a lean startup training course for USAID’s Tech4Farmers program in Singapore and taught in the University of Arkansas’ inaugural I-Corps program. She is an Arkansas delegate in the Delta Regional Authority’s Delta Leadership Institute.

The Delta I-Fund has onboarded nine lean startup instructors and over 35 mentors to the team.

