American Rescue Plan State Fiscal Recovery Fund Recommendation
Cover Sheet

Please submit this document with any recommendations for funding from Rhode Island’s allocation of federal fiscal recovery funds available through the American Rescue Plan Act. This information will be made available to the public along with any detailed documents submitted that describe the proposal. It is encouraged that such documents identify clear goals and objectives and quantifiable metrics.

This is not a formal request for funds, and submission of recommendations does not guarantee a response, public hearing, or appropriation from the General Assembly.

Name of Lead Agency: HIGHER GROUND INTERNATIONAL

Additional agencies making recommendation (if applicable): ____________________________

Contact Person / Title: HENRIETTA WHITE-HOLDER Phone: 401-339-2948

Address: 250 PRAIRIE AVENUE, PROVIDENCE, RI 02905

Email Address (if available) HENRIETTAHOLDER@GMAIL.COM

Brief Project Description (attachments should contain details)
SWEETIE CARE AFRICAN ELDERS ENRICHMENT PROGRAM

Total request: $1,859,080

One-time or Recurring Expense? ONE TIME

ARPA Eligibility Category (check all that apply) – See link for further information

- Respond to the public health emergency and its economic impacts x
- Premium pay to eligible workers x
- Government services/state revenue replacement
- Water/sewer/broadband infrastructure
Sweetie Care African Elders Enrichment Program

Prepared Date: November 12, 2021

Grant Request: $1,859,080

Brief Description: Sweetie Care African Elders Enrichment Program is a day program that provides a holistic, culturally relevant social integration, and case management services to African immigrants/refugees and other ethnic elders and their families in Providence, Rhode Island. Sweetie Care is the conduit through which all HGI's Social Services programs derives.
American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA): Use of Federal Funds Grant Proposal
Sweetie Care African Elders Enrichment Program

Organization: Higher Ground International
EIN#: 11-384652
DUNS #: 039-222-862
Submitted: November 28, 2021

Contractor Information:
Agency Name: Higher Ground International
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    Providence, RI 02905
Phone: 401-270-3582 (Office) 401-339-2948 (Cell)
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I. Higher Ground Mission:

Higher Ground International is a forward thinking and culturally grounded intergenerational social services NGO dedicated to restoring dignity, empowering lives, and keeping peace. We provide meaningful opportunities for immigration advocacy, literacy, access to health care, workforce inclusion and community integration for African immigrants, refugees, and marginalized communities in Rhode Island.

Our Why:

Higher Ground is an advocate for our community. Our identities matter - our ancestors were stolen and enslaved here, building this country, they shared their blood and died here. We must honor their sacrifice by continuing their legacy and cultural identity as we build a more equitable future for generations to come. Elder lives matter. And they deserve the same dignity and consideration as everyone else.

Background:

In 2015, HGI opened the RUKIYA Center at 250 Prairie Avenue in the heart of south Providence, to create a warm, welcoming, and inclusive place for all, especially underserved West African immigrant and refugee participants. We built a vibrant environment for the organization’s on-site Sweetie Care program for elderly West African Women ages (65-90). Sweetie Care operates five days a week with a small base of program staff, volunteers, a gracious network of collaborating partners, and minimal financial resources. At the helm of HGI is its founder and CEO, Henrietta White-Holder, who before starting Higher Ground thirteen (13) years ago has worked in the non-profit human services sector as a residential director for over twenty-four years, helping to deinstitutionalize individuals with differing abilities by integrating them into community settings by opening new group homes, hiring teams of staff, and managing them. In addition to that, Henrie has been a long-time advocate and mentor for newly arrived Liberian youth refugees and families in Rhode Island since she was in her early twenties.

To increase the program’s overall effectiveness and geographic impact, grant funding and other financial resources is necessary.

The elders have lived as refugees and have experienced various forms of violence against women that stem from war, living as refugees and the sociocultural practices in a patriarchal society in Africa. As the first and only resource of its kind in RI, this unique program strives to meet the multi-faceted needs of older immigrant/refugee adults by providing an empowering and culturally relevant space to socialize, learn, and receive health and social services. This intentional, cultural approach works to bridge the cultural divide with African youth, families and the broader community who are also struggling with unspoken traumas.
Our program model creates a seamless intergenerational program for HGI's participants. This is vital for their cognitive well-being and provides the much-needed care and resources to maintain a vibrant quality of life.

**Sweetie Care:**

Sweetie Care African Elders Enrichment Program is a day program that provides a holistic, culturally relevant social integration, and case management support to African immigrants and refugee elders in Providence, RI.

HGI is now well-known in the African immigrant/refugee community as a welcoming organization on Providence’s South Side that works to empower women, youth, and elders as agents of change and self-determination. The first resource of its kind in the African immigrant and refugee elder community in Rhode Island, this unique and holistically conceived day program fills an increasing void of culturally focused elder services and provides a safe and responsive space to meet the needs of our vulnerable elders.

Our elder care model consists of an integrated social and educational, awareness building and recreation-focused program that provides a continuum of culturally responsive case management and wraparound support services. We intentionally do all of this from the context of the African tradition to maintain the cultural norms for this vulnerable population of Elders. The development of the elder program was a natural progression, born of the unique needs of isolated and traumatized elderly West African refugee and immigrant women new to Rhode Island.

Through this program we strive to meet the multi-faceted needs of older immigrant/refugees by providing a culturally relevant space for participants to socialize, learn, and receive social services at HGI’s Rukiya Center, including:

- Basic English literacy and structured learning activities
- Culturally Appropriate Hot Meals
- Trauma and Mental Health Support
- Exercise
- Health and Wellness
- Linguistic and interpreting of ethnic vernaculars
- Daily devotion
- Transportation
- Walkabout club
- Therapeutic | Healing art sessions, (knitting, drawing, music, dance)
- Case management services
- Community engagement and social cohesion
- Beginning sewing instruction

**Community We Serve:**
As of 2017, it is estimated that Rhode Island has 16,000 African residents (Migration Policy Institute.) Though Liberians only make up 0.4 percent of Providence’s population, Providence maintains one of the three largest Liberian immigrant communities in America.

Our approach is to provide a culturally sensitive, interactive, and healthy aging-in-place program for elders and indirectly their families.

We found that these women lived in a variety of home settings throughout the state: with adult children, with other elderly hosts, with each other, or most often, alone. In addition, many have limited American English--speaking skills and reading ability due to never having attended school or having had their primary education disrupted. However, we have seen that all the women longed to connect to each other, retain their religious beliefs and cultural rituals, and to remain living in the community, but in need of extra support that their families are not able to provide, usually due to cost. This is the first program of its kind in Rhode Island that speaks to and promotes the specific cultural, linguistic, physical, mental, and cognitive health needs of African immigrants and refugees’ elders as they aged.

While there are various elder day centers in Rhode Island (e.g. Pace, Elmwood Adult Day, St. Martin De Porres), Rhode Island does not have a full-time culturally relevant and socially responsive elder day center that addresses and embraces the innate cultural needs and social norms of Elderly African immigrants and refugees in the state. In response to what Founder Henrietta White-Holder saw as an emergent need, HGI has since begun the Sweetie Care African Elders Enrichment Program which is now in its sixth year of operation.

**Elder Population:**

Sweetie Care provides culturally relevant programs that are targeted at low-income and vulnerable African immigrants and refugees' and other ethnic minorities elders, 65 years and older. *Rhode Island Aging in Community Report- June 2016*

In 2010, an estimated 14.4% of the state population was aged 65 and over and 2.5% aged 85 and over. By 2014, an estimated 15.8 percent were aged 65 and over and 2.7% aged 85 and over (Administration for Community Living, 2013a).

According to Rhode Island Statewide Planning Office projections, by 2030 there will be almost 100,000 more persons aged 65 and over than there were in 2010 and they will make up 23% of the state population (RI Division of Planning, 2013).
II. Expanding our Vision

RUKIYA CENTER

Concept for Expanded Space
Vision Criteria for Space:

4,500 - 5,000 Square Feet to house all HGI’s current programs and services and plans for growth. (Providence – South Side or West End) Must be on the Bus Line, Parking, Outdoors Space, Storage, ADA A accessible Bathroom, Kitchen, and offices | Classrooms.

Problem:

During the past six years, the Rukiya Center at Higher Ground International (HGI) has operated from a small space within the complex of the Urban League’s facility in South Providence. Despite our limited space, HGI served 75 West African refugee elders and families in its Sweetie Care Day Program from 2016-2019. At the advent of the pandemic, we were inspired to step up and expand services to include a COVID-19 response to help combat food and resource insecurity amongst the elders and our immigrants and underserved neighbors across the State. Through passion and determination, we pivoted to provide on-site distribution and services for over 200 elders and 15,000 individuals and families from one modest 1,100 sq. ft location.

To be clear, the organization had outgrown its current space at the Rukiya Center at 250 Prairie Avenue, long before the COVID-19 pandemic. HGI’s work had blossomed to the point where we had to limit the intake of new participants because of the capacity limitations. With a robust participation of elders, youth, women, and team members in attendance at the Rukiya Center five times a week pre-COVID, we were not able to optimize the way we delivered services, nor expand the reach of Sweetie Care to accommodate the emerging need. The COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing requirements have further complicated this problem, making it exceedingly difficult to efficiently carry out our critical programming and services.

And now our capacity problem is exacerbated by a need for immediate relocation. The crux of the challenge that we are currently facing, is that the Urban League is in receivership and the complex is about to be sold with plans to have it demolished relatively soon. Furthermore, the space is becoming dilapidated and unsafe for occupancy. This has created a sense of urgency and uncertainty for the future of HGI. Additionally, the space does not meet the standard requirements for a dedicated kitchen, sinks and ADA accessible bathrooms in which to be approved by the RI Department of Health as a Senior / Community Center.

This situation also prevents Higher Ground from qualifying for Medicaid reimbursements, which are crucial funds that would help with our sustainability and growth. We have been in talks and have signed a MOU with OHA and Meals on Wheels partnering to open a cultural food café for the elders. However, we are again challenged by the lack of adequate space in which we can accomplish this new goal.

Unfortunately, the issue faced by HGI is a recurring theme happening throughout Black and
Brown (BIPOC) communities – a lack of ownership equals a lack of power. This is the second time that Higher Ground has had to move from a location because the space was taken back or made impossible for the organization to thrive in. We are at the mercy of others when we are not allowed the opportunity to retain property of our own. This is because of the inequitable distribution of resources and funding to BIPOC lead organizations. And what this leads to is a lack of stability and a dependance on others for our very existence. It also prohibits us from having the quantitative impact to help lift our own communities out of poverty.

HGI is now on a quest to change that by moving from our 1,100 square foot space to a bigger and more stable location as soon as possible to scale the organization's work. What we must make emphatically clear, is that Higher Ground International is the only program of its kind within the African immigrant community that speaks to the specific cultural and linguistic needs of our ethnic immigrant elders and single mothers on a full time basic. It is crucial that we build and invest in it to meet the unmet cultural needs that currently exist in the African and other Ethnic Immigrant/Refugees' communities, and we have growth plans ready to execute.

**Solution:**

HGI is endeavoring to reach out to strategic partners such as The RI Foundation, Champlain Foundation, United Way of RI, State of RI, City of Pawtucket, and others who are willing to invest in racial equity and justice for BIPOC organizations to support Higher Ground in its effort to find a safe and stable space where we can flourish in doing what we do best, which is SERVE the community.

**The Goal:**

The goal is for HGI to raise $900,000 dollars which will assist the organization with the acquisition, build-out and furnishing of our new space.

This new center will enable the organization to serve an additional 200 community members in elder services and women’s workforce programs with another 500 being served in case management and distribution of culturally appropriate foods and other life-changing resources.

**Investments to Date:**

**City of Providence**

The City of Providence has been a great partner to Higher Ground International, providing seed funding of $75,000 (with the goal of attracting additional capital) to support our growth, as we explore the acquisition of a potential relocation. They have provided additional funding to support the organization’s elders and family impact programs in Providence.

**United Way of Rhode Island**
Additionally, the United Way of Rhode Island, has invested a two-year grant of $150,000 to support the launch of HGI’s “Reaching Higher Ground” Women’s Workforce Program. What they have done that is so outstanding and speaks to their strategic vision for effecting equity within BIPOC organizations, is they have converted the grant to support HGI’s space and development needs.

**Why this is Important**

Higher Ground is doing amazing work for the common good, despite the many obstacles that have been placed in our path. We have been a reliable community partner in RI, volunteering during the COVID-19 crisis to pivot to meet the vital needs of the community by providing support and services to an expanded population of over 15,000 elders, families, and people some of whom are immunocompromised, struggling with mental and physical health problems, quarantined, and recovering from COVID-related illnesses.

And now, Higher Ground is reemerging post-COVID, mindful of the vulnerable population that it serves, their health and well-being, and the space in which they congregate. The organization is also seeking to start its women’s workforce program in a spacious and nurturing environment to help women of working age gain the confidence and skills for self-sufficiency and economic empowerment. We are determined to continue this good work and is fully aware of its importance.

Our identities matter – our ancestors were stolen and enslaved here, building this country, they shared their blood and died here. We must honor their sacrifice by continuing their legacy and cultural identity as we build a more equitable future for generations to come.

The organization’s expansion will help fulfill HGI’s mission and as well as be of a great benefit to the women, families, and the larger community. Please join us!

**Programs & Services:**

**Elder Services** – Sweetie Care

**Women’s Workforce** – Reaching Higher Ground | Social Enterprise | Manufacturing

**Education**: Basic Literacy & ESOL Classes | Financial Literacy

**Case Management Services** – (Health, Housing, Culturally Appropriate Foods, Clothing, Social Services, Child Care, etc.)

**Non-perishable Food Distribution** – Addressing culturally appropriate food insecurity.

**Cultural Food Café** – Partnerships with OHA & Meals on Wheels
Internships – College students gaining experience in cultural competency and community building while helping to access valuable resources for vulnerable community members.

III. Culturally Appropriate Food Distribution

Summary:

Higher Ground has recognized a gap for culturally appropriate foods for African and other ethnic immigrant and marginalized elders and families in the local distribution channels during the COVID-19 crisis, resulting in significant food insecurity in this population. The organization is working to address this emergent need.

Understanding the meaning of “Culture and Culturally Appropriate Foods”

Culture defines social structure, decision-making practices, and communication styles and offers a sense of identity, order, and security. As a powerful symbol of cultural identity, food is more than an object or product to be purchased for routine consumption into daily life. Immigrant/ethnic groups maintain their cultural identities with their food practices, values, and beliefs and it is hard for people to change this when forced to eat foods outside their cultural norms because of difficult circumstances.

With heightened outreach for food assistance and other life-sustaining supports due to job loss, instabilities in housing, social distancing, and the presence of COVID-19, there is an increased need for more culturally appropriate foods for immigrant community members.

Part of the comfort measures and recovery process for quarantined or socially isolated individuals involves addressing culturally appropriate food insecurity, both for nutritional fulfillment and as a response to isolation and separation from families and communities.

There is a widespread assumption that “culturally appropriate food” can be obtained by purchasing the “right” groceries. However, culturally appropriate food is not simply the food itself, but rather the cumulative result of combining traditions and practices that are central to its production, preparation, and consumption.

All food donations to HGI and immigrant communities are of course well intentioned. However, by framing typical donations of shelf-stable food such as ready-to-eat, pre-packaged meals and canned goods that are often high in sodium, as “the answer” to hunger and inequality, local food conversation often silences the real dietary needs and cultural heritage of the very individuals it seeks to help. In response, HGI has called for cultural sensitivity and an awareness of individual culture when procuring and distributing donated food items. Donations of culturally appropriate foods, such as plantains, yams (not American sweet potatoes), fresh, leafy greens, and “fufu” (a
starchy mix used to make traditional dumplings) has helped our constituents to maintain their
dignity when reaching out to “find something to eat” because it takes great courage for African
immigrants to ask for food assistance. That, in and of itself, is an exceedingly difficult thing for
African immigrants because of the shame and stigma associated with being labeled a “beggar.”

Food is only culturally appropriate in context; the same food, eaten with different people, in a
different place and a different time, may hold an entirely different cultural meaning and
connotation. Therefore, speaking about culturally appropriate food is not speaking just about
what people eat but about how and with whom they eat.

**Community Served and Needs:**

Higher Ground Sweetie Care provides culturally relevant programs that are targeted at low-
income and vulnerable African immigrants and refugees' and other ethnic minorities elders, 65
years and older. The abruptness in the closing of the Rukiya Center" was a major disruption in
the lives of the elders. No longer a source of socialization, support, and consistent meals, the
current situation resulted in the elders’ experiencing acute social isolation, food insecurity, and
for some, re-traumatization. We heard from the Elders how being socially isolated reminded
them of "war time" in Liberia when they had to abide by curfews, and nobody would be allowed
outside. There has also been much sadness in their voices when they shared how much this loss
has disrupted their daily lives: “We miss our center and our friends,” "We miss all the fun things
that we do there,” and “We don't know what's coming next."

**The COVID-19 Pivot: Deliveries and Impact**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Higher Ground supported 50 Elders and indirectly their
families through its Sweetie Care African Elders Enrichment, which operated full time at the
Rukiya Center. When the social distancing mandate was put in place, HGI was able to pivot
amidst the crisis. With a dedicated team and the support of an army of over 500 generous
community volunteers, the organization's response was an agile one, maintaining virtual contacts
twice per week delivering culturally appropriate hot meals, non-perishable and stable food items,
essential health supplies, PPE, and cleaning supplies, in addition to arts and craft projects to keep
the elders stimulated.

We began virtual social wellness checks with medical students from Brown University and
provided updated COVID-19-related information and basic essential needs such as cell phones
and medications for our vulnerable elders, at risk families, and those who are immuno-
compromised.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, from March to May 2020, HGI provided deliveries to 147
vulnerable elders and families with young children. Since we began conducting this outreach, we
have been flooded with calls from individuals and families who need our assistance.
Expanding the Outreach to the Broader Community

After twelve weeks of intense COVID-19 engagements in the community, we realized that the problem was much bigger for members of the community and their families who were COVID-19 positive and quarantined, those who have developed a sudden onset of mental health challenges, and for the general population which were struggling to make ends meet. Whenever HGI was made aware of an unmet need for culturally appropriate food and other resources, HGI did not hesitate to address these needs.

On June 11th, 2020, Higher Ground expanded its outreach efforts to include on-site distributions in addition to the organization’s home deliveries, serving 306 community members at that time. The organizations outreach efforts and impact ballooned from there.

By the end of December 2020, HGI had distributed and delivered services and supports to over 15,000 vulnerable elders and other at-risk community members, including other Africans, Haitians, Latinos, African Americans, Whites, and Asians. We have observed and been told that there is great appreciation and need for the culturally appropriate food and supplies. This is the direct impact that HGI made during the covid-19 pandemic in our community:

2020 Direct COVID-19 Relief Impact:

- $200,000+ WeR1 Cash Assistance for vulnerable who do not meet the requirements to qualify for federal benefits.
- $32,000 in Rental Assistance from Restore RI Grant Funds
- $100,000+ New-Donated Adult Clothes and Baby supplies
- Supported 8,000 vulnerable community members
- Over 500 Volunteers
- 150,000+ Bags of Culturally Appropriate Fresh Produce, Staple Items, Fish and Chicken to Vulnerable Elders and others to address the alarming need of food insecurity within the community.
- 5,000+ Culturally Appropriate Hot Meals Provided and Delivered to Elders & Immuno-compromised Community Members
- $5,000 Job Lot Gift Cards Donated by Job Lot & RI Foundation
- Provided over 12,000 PPE’s, Masks & Cleaning Supplies since March 2020
❖ Provided Case Management Services and Referrals to apply for the WeR1 Cash Assistance, Rental, Snap, Addressing Food Insecurity, and other Life-Enhancing Benefit Programs
❖ 700 “BeSafe Plus” Culturally Appropriate Food Boxes and Supplies Through Partnerships with Office of Healthy Aging, Family Services RI & United Way of RI
❖ $7,000 Immigration Assistance Fees to Assist Liberians Adjusting Immigration Status Through the Liberian Refugee Immigration Fairness (LRIF) Act
❖ 315 Tested Through On-site Covid-19 Testing Partnership with Lifespan Community Health Centers and RI Department of Health
❖ 260 Counted via on-site US Census Partnership
❖ 300 Voters Educated and Registered
❖ 85 Covid Vaccines and Boosters and counting

HGI faces significant challenges with this critical work. The greatest challenge is the lack of financial resources to serve everyone who comes to the Rukiya Center in need of food assistance and the lack adequate transportation (Van) for deliveries.

**Program Goals and Implementation**

Higher Ground’s goals are to provide culturally appropriate fresh produce and staple foods items as well as hot meals through the Cultural Café once we have transition to a bigger space where we can than establish it. We will support 350 (Three hundred and fifty) vulnerable and at-risks members of Rhode Island’s immigrant and other marginalized communities on a monthly basis.

**System of Distribution, Procurements and Packaging:**

During the height of the Covid pandemic, HGI established a two-pronged system of distribution utilizing our army of over 500 volunteers. However, this model is no longer sustainable and as such, the organization must hire permanent staff, providing a living wage to implement this program.

**Mondays:** Hot Meals are delivered to home-bound elders and other at-risk community members and or consumed at HGI’s Rukiya Center Cultural Café.

The culturally appropriate hot meals are prepared by a licensed caterer, Ms. Eleanor Baie, a longtime owner of Eleanor’s African restaurant on Broad Street in Providence and pillar in the community.
**Thursdays:** On-site distribution where community members can come into the Rukiya Center to access culturally appropriate foods, PPE, cleaning supplies and other resources.

All items are procured by HGI on Thursday of the previous week – deliveries are made to the Rukiya Center on Mondays and Tuesdays. They are then sorted and packaged on Wednesdays and made ready for distribution and deliveries on Thursdays.

**Home Deliveries** - Delivery of the same items to those who are home bound.

Higher Ground’s team, with support from dedicated community volunteers, will deliver the meals following social distancing protocols and minimal contact to participating elders and families throughout the urban core of RI. Delivery zones include communities that have been disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 Pandemic. All food items and supplies are purchased wholesale from local businesses which help to stimulate the economy and keep Rhode Islanders employed.

**IV. Budget Proposal**

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**GROSS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**GROSS FOOD & TRANSPORTATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>483,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Operations Expenses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auditing</td>
<td>2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent</td>
<td>55,000 mo x 12 mos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Maintenance</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depreciation</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax &amp; Licenses</td>
<td>28,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone &amp; Internet</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation, maintenance, gas, registrations, etc.</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilities</td>
<td>12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Hosting Domain, SEO</td>
<td>2,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**GROSS OPERATING EXPENSES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>151,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Net All Categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>710,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Net Operating Cost**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,149,080</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Full Total Program Budget**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,859,080</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>